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Middle Eastern post-conflict futures in education:  
Iraq, Syria and Yemen

Guest Editors: Carol Webb and Juliet Millican



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## Middle Eastern post-conflict futures in education: Iraq, Syria and Yemen

Conflict takes an incommensurate toll on education, jeopardizing children's present and future. The statistics are staggering. Today, approximately 75m crisis-affected children aged 3–18, of whom many live in conflict situations, are in urgent need of quality education. This is so because children in conflict-affected countries are 30 percent less likely to complete primary school and half as likely to complete lower-secondary school[1]. About two thirds of all out-of-school children, adolescents and youth worldwide live in conflict affected countries[2].

For those able to escape conflict, education remains a challenge. The educational status of refugee children tends to be worse than that of their non-refugee peers. About 60 percent attend primary education, while 90 percent of the world's children attend primary school. Only 23 percent of refugee adolescents are in lower-secondary school. In contrast, 84 percent of the world's adolescents attend school.

In conflict situation, children's safety in schools and educational institutions is also increasingly under attack. Between 2000 and 2014, the numbers of education institutions targeted rose 17-fold[3]. Further, during conflict, wealth-based and gender disparities in education increase. Girls living in conflict- and crisis-affected contexts are nearly 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than if they live non-conflict/crisis countries. Conflicts also have a heavy toll on the quality of education – though there is a lack of evidence documenting the scope of this impact, as too often learning outcomes are not assessed in conflict situations.

In 2017, humanitarian response plan education appeals amounted to \$800m in 2017, while refugee education appeals amounted to close to \$1bn[4]. Actual needs are even greater: emergencies could add approximately \$9bn to projected education costs overall by 2030[5]. Yet, only 4 percent of all humanitarian funding went to education in 2017. Even when funding is there, it tends to be fragmented and short-term. If funding comes and goes, so does children's education.

Education Cannot Wait (ECW) was created at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 to transform and strengthen the education response in emergency and protracted crises, and fill the gap that leaves behind millions of children whose education is disrupted by crisis. In its first year of operations, by March 2018, ECW had allocated some \$84m in 14 countries, reaching over 650,000 children and youth (48 percent of them girls), most of them in conflict situations.

ECW's investments are geared to support rapid lifesaving education responses at the onset of a crisis and extend beyond the short span of humanitarian interventions to bridge the gap between humanitarian and development aid. ECW facilitates the establishment of joint multi-year programs in protracted crises, bringing together humanitarian and development actors to ensure predictability and coordination in the education response. In addition, ECW aims at funding research and innovation to generate much needed evidence-based knowledge and public goods to further inform and improve the education response.

Crisis situations may not always be conducive to academic research. Yet, there are high needs to develop practical evidence, particularly as to what works to actually improve learning and decrease education inequalities that are both a result and a driver of conflict. The special issue on the Middle Eastern post-conflict futures: Iraq, Syria and Yemen, is much welcome. It puts a spotlight on research in conflict and post-conflict environments, and can provide much needed insight to help inform the response in the region and support millions of children in need.



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In Syria, after seven years of crisis, an estimated 5.8m children and youth and over 300,000 education personnel need urgent education assistance. Across the country, 1.75m school-age children are out of school. In Yemen, three years of conflict have left hundreds of schools destroyed or damaged. The number of out-of-school children is estimated at 3.6m. Most teachers have not received a full salary since October 2016. In Iraq, the education sector has been particularly hard-hit by the crisis. Schools in conflict-affected areas are operating double and triple shifts. Nearly 50 percent of children in displaced camps do not have access to quality education and 3.2m children attend school irregularly or not at all[6].

ECW has allocated \$15m in Syria to strengthen the capacity of the education system, improve access to equitable learning opportunities and improve relevance of education within a protective environment. ECW also allocated US\$15m in Yemen to help set up temporary learning spaces, distribute learning materials, conduct end of cycle exams, and strengthen child protection and violence prevention. Iraq is among the 25 priority countries identified by ECW for future investments.

However, much more needs to be done. I am hopeful that the body of research and analysis presented in this special issue will guide donors, governments, aid actors and affected communities in joining efforts to better support learning opportunities for the millions of children and youth affected by the crises in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. They deserve no less.

**Yasmine Sherif**

*United Nations – Education Cannot Wait – Global Fund for Education in Emergencies UNICEF, New York, New York, USA*

#### Notes

1. The Learning generation: investing in education for a changing world; New York, International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2016.
2. UIS, 2018.
3. Research for Equitable Access and Learning Centre (REAL), University of Cambridge. 2015. “REAL: Let Girls Learn in Conflict Settings.”
4. OCHA Financial Tracking System and UNHCR data.
5. The Learning generation: investing in education for a changing world; International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2016.
6. Iraq 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan.

# “We are still here”: the stories of Syrian academics in exile

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to generate insight into the experiences of Syrian academics in exile in Turkey; and second, to explore approaches to collaboration and community building among academics in exile and with counterparts in the international academic community.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study employs a hybrid visual-autobiographical narrative methodology, embedded within a large group process (LGP) design.

**Findings** – Findings are presented in two phases: the first phase presents a thematic analysis of narrative data, revealing the common and divergent experiences of 12 exiled academics. The second phase presents a reflective evaluation of undertaking the LGP and its implications for community building and sustaining Syrian academia in exile.

**Research limitations/implications** – While this is a qualitative study with a small participant group, and therefore does not provide a basis for statistical generalisation, it offers rich insight into Syrian academics' lived experiences of exile, and into strategies implemented to support the Syrian academic community in exile.

**Practical implications** – The study has practical implications for academic development in the contexts of conflict and exile; community building among dispersed academic communities; educational interventions by international NGOs and the international academic community; and group process design.

**Originality/value** – The study makes an original contribution to the limited literature on post-2011 Syrian higher education by giving voice to a community of exiled academics, and by critically evaluating a strategic initiative for supporting and sustaining Syrian academia. This represents significant, transferable insight for comparable contexts.

**Keywords** Syria, Higher education, Exile, Collaboration

**Paper type** Research paper



## Introduction

Of the 15 named authors of this paper, 12 are Syrian academics currently living in exile in Turkey, and the remaining 3 are UK-based academics. Our collaboration took place through the Council for At Risk Academics' (Cara) Syria Programme (hereafter SP), which supports Syrian academics in exile in countries within the Middle East region in sustaining their academic work in exile, and which is staffed on a voluntary basis by academics from universities in the UK, Turkey and Europe. Following an initial scoping exercise (Cara, 2016), the Cara SP was devised across three strategic strands: English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Research Incubation (RI) and Academic Skills Development (ASD).

The Syrians among us share the experience of having seen our country decimated by conflict, and having left our homes, our jobs and in some cases our families behind to seek refuge in an unfamiliar new country. But our stories are not the same: we are a disparate group of individuals, each having experienced a different route to exile, from different starting points, and at different times. We now live in different cities across Turkey, experience different environments and host cultures, and do not all see each other regularly outside of SP events. Some of us are scientists, others are engineers and others historians. Some have found employment in Turkish universities, some even with permanent contracts, others are unemployed, others still cross the border regularly to teach inside Syria, others provide consultancy and technical support for local NGOs to address challenges faced by populations inside Syria, and others deliver lectures and promote new knowledge using e-learning environments. Yet we were brought together by circumstance and share a responsibility to stay active as scholars, in order to safeguard our nation's intellectual heritage for subsequent generations. Despite our diffuse and diverse nature, as a community of scholars we represent the past, present and future of Syrian higher education, and much of our work on the SP is geared towards strengthening our community and preparing ourselves for the challenges that lie ahead, with the support of colleagues from the international academic community. This work is the focus of this paper.

The three UK-based authors work in British universities and volunteer on the SP variously as facilitators, workshop leaders, mentors and English language teachers. We, the UK-based authors, believe that the responsibility to safeguard and protect higher education should not rest solely with those directly affected, but with the global higher education community.

Since February 2017, the SP community has convened at seven residential events in Istanbul. These events have been attended by 30–60 Syrian academics, and a typical cohort of 5–10 UK academics serving as facilitators. These events last several days, and comprise intensive workshops focussed around the strands of EAP and ASD. Beyond this, however, the agenda of the SP is not pre-determined: rather, it follows an inductive action research approach, and the residential events also serve as points to periodically evaluate participants' experiences, diagnose problems and identify needs and opportunities to inform the design and delivery of subsequent activities. Data to date have been collected via interview and focus group, but also through bespoke large group processes (LGPs), activities involving eight or more participants (Martin, 2005) working together to identify and address common issues. LGPs on the SP constitute vital learning experiences for all participants, fostering understanding, trust and rapport, and helping us to achieve areas of consensus, formulate strategic responses to challenges, and develop relational agency and relational expertise (Edwards, 2011). In this paper, we outline and present the findings of a two-day LGP, designed to address four principal objectives:

- (1) to generate understanding of Syrian academics' experiences of life in exile, both within and beyond our community;
- (2) to foster collaboration among and between Syrian and international academics;

- (3) to provide an authentic opportunity to investigate Syrian academia in exile systematically, using qualitative research techniques and approaches; and
- (4) to provide an opportunity to develop and activate core English language skills and vocabulary, in order to support awareness raising and engagement with the international community.

The Syrian authors adopted the dual role of participant–researcher, being at once the sources of data and those undertaking the intersubjective analysis. Visual and autobiographical methods were used to elicit and compare our individual narratives relating to academic life in exile. Graphic interim data were used as stimuli to facilitate the capture of reflective verbal data, which were then analysed collectively using thematic analysis techniques.

We begin by situating the study within the context of Syrian academia in exile, summarising the impact of conflict and war on Syrian higher education and its populations. This is followed by a summary of the work of Cara, and the action research model of its SP in particular. We then turn our attention to our primary research, outlining the rationale and methodology for the study, and our application of visual and autobiographical methods and thematic analysis. Our findings are then presented in two phases. The first presents the results of a thematic analysis of narrative data pertaining to the Syrian authors' experiences of exile. The second phase presents a reflective evaluation of the LGP in relation to the objectives set out above, and draws on qualitative evaluation survey data collected shortly after the LGP, and on the authors' subsequent reflections captured during an online discussion forum. In our concluding discussion, we synthesise the findings of these two phases within the frame of relational agency, highlighting challenges and opportunities in relation to collaboration, community building and capacity building in the context of exile, displacement and trauma, and offering suggestions for future higher education projects in conflict regions.

### **Syrian HE in the context of conflict**

Syria's civil war first broke out in 2011. In the intervening seven years, all aspects of public life inside the country have been ravaged by violence and its fallout. Higher education has not been spared: university buildings, infrastructure and resources have been destroyed, and their populations have been subjected to violent attacks, intimidation and militarisation (Anonymous, 2016; Bakarar and Milton, 2015; Bariscil, 2017; Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014; Young-Powell, 2017). Over the last seven years, over 2,000 academics have fled Syria (King, 2016; Sheikh, 2016), mostly to the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. Refugee academic communities in these countries can face hostility, and linguistic and bureaucratic obstacles to continuing their academic work (Al-Ibrahim, 2016; Sheikh, 2016); the Institute of International Education estimates that less than 10 per cent of displaced Syrian academics have continued their academic careers in exile (Sheikh, 2016). In Turkey, the country that has accepted the largest number of Syrian refugees, exiled academics can experience restrictions in relation to travelling beyond and within the country, or undertaking certain types of paid work, due to conditions associated with their temporary protection status (İçduygu and Millet, 2016), or to lacking necessary documentation (Ammar, 2016).

Research in comparable conflict contexts such as Iraq and Afghanistan has highlighted legacies of psychological trauma among staff and students (Babury and Hayward, 2013; Bright and Mahdi, 2009). Inevitably, life for Syrian academics in exile can entail a dramatic shift in material circumstances and the loss of social status (Al-Ibrahim, 2016; Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014), compounding high levels of psychological trauma resulting from violence and displacement (Avery and Said, 2017; Bakarar and Milton, 2015; King, 2016; Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014; Young-Powell, 2016).

De Wit and Altbach (2016) noted that well-educated Syrians currently based in European and other developed countries are statistically unlikely to return home. This points to a profound, long-term skills deficit inside Syria, and the need for higher education solutions to educate and train the Syrian population to address future challenges. Syrian academics continue to engage in teaching and learning, among the rubble of destroyed campuses, in refugee camps, in temporary buildings and online. Implicit in these activities is a clear message: we, the Syrian academic community, are still here. Among academics who have fled the country, many have maintained contact with their students and are committed to working in exile to secure their country's future through education. Initiatives such as the Jamiya Project (Webster, 2016) have sought to connect Syrian academics and students, and support engagement in higher education among refugee communities. The impetus to teach, learn and research remains.

While we have no reason to doubt its veracity, it should be acknowledged that much of the literature referenced above might be considered grey literature. Notwithstanding recent exceptions, the plight of Syrian academia post-2011 has been neglected within scholarly research, and first-hand accounts from within the Syrian academic community are particularly scarce. A key aim in writing this paper therefore is to address this scarcity.

The 12 Syrian authors of this paper count ourselves among the Syrian academic community exiled within the region. In seeking to safeguard an academic future for our country, key challenges our community faces relate to promoting awareness internationally of the need to protect Syrian higher education, self-organisation, engaging with the international community and the establishment of appropriate models of collaboration in the absence of suitable infrastructure and resources, and in the context of trauma and difficult material circumstances.

### **Cara: supporting at risk academics since 1933**

Cara is a UK-based non-profit NGO that has supported academics at risk from conflict and persecution since 1933. Cara's precursors the Academic Assistance Council and the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL) were established in 1933 and 1936, respectively, in response to the expulsion of academics under Nazi Germany. During the Second World War, the SPSL provided support and financial assistance to some 2,000 academics and their families fleeing Europe to the UK and other countries, and connecting them with networks of international colleagues. This approach continued after the end of the War, with Cara supporting academics at risk in other global contexts, and is still the main basis for Cara's Fellowship Scheme, which assists individual academics by securing visiting academic positions at UK universities, and offering stipendiary support. In recent years, however, in response to the scale and duration of crises in the Middle East, Cara has also established regional programmes offering *in situ* support to academic communities still domiciled in the region.

The SP in Turkey was launched in 2016. Marketing of the programme to these communities has largely been through word of mouth, and recruitment relies on individual academics making contact with Cara, and formally asking to join the programme. Criteria for registration are that the applicant must hold, or previously held, an academic post, and a minimum of a master's degree. There are currently over 150 Syrian academics registered on the programme, the majority of whom are based in cities across Turkey. From the outset, the SP has been needs-driven and focussed on capacity building across the three key strands of EAP, ASD and RI. Regular reconnaissance, consultation and evaluation informs programme design and delivery, and ensures that needs are identified and addressed. The programme is overseen by strand steering groups comprising UK academics, Syrian academics (Cara fellows) and Cara staff. The EAP

strand of the programme is delivered via a combination of weekly one-to-one lessons with an assigned tutor via a dedicated portal, and intensive residential events. The ASD strand is delivered through a programme of fortnightly webinars, planned around emerging needs and issues, and intensive residential events. Where opportunities arise, RI is facilitated through individual peer mentorship by UK-based researchers with similar research interests, and three- to six-week long visits to UK universities to support collaboration.

In addition, a key holistic objective of the SP is to facilitate networking and collaboration among the Syrian academic community in exile. Cara activities, and the residential events in particular, provide opportunities for Syrian academics to come together to work on projects, share plans and ideas, and simply be in each other's company.

### **Rationale: telling our stories, and learning to work together**

As noted earlier, this study sits within the wider action research context of the Cara SP, and as such has concomitant, mutually supporting research and applied (action) aims. Applied aims include building capacity in research methods, EAP and learning to work together as a diverse, multidisciplinary community. Learning to work together is our foremost applied aim here, alongside the research aim of generating insight relating to the experiences of Syrian academics in exile.

Edwards (2011) observed that in addition to specialist (disciplinary) expertise, collaboration between individuals with different backgrounds and expertise requires relational expertise, "an additional form of expertise which makes it possible to work with others to expand understandings of the work problem as [...] an object of activity" (p. 33). This arises from relational agency, a term that denotes the "capacity to work with others to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems" (p. 34). In contrast to hierarchical collaborations involving clear leadership by a single individual who is supported and resourced by others, in relational collaborations tasks are expanded and enriched by mutual recognition of others' values, motives and resources, and the realignment of one's own responses to the collective interpretations that arise from this mutual recognition. Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) meanwhile examined leadership from a relational perspective, moving away from the dominant focus in leadership research on individual traits. In contrast, a relational approach assumes that leadership is co-constructed in relational interaction processes that support meaningful collaboration. While Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) focussed on hierarchical relationships, their understanding of relational leadership as shared, dynamic and potentially fluid is pertinent to flat leadership contexts, as is Brower *et al.*'s (2000) observation that effective relational leadership is characterised by trust. From a philosophical perspective, Buber's (1923/1970/2013) distinction between I-it (Ich-es) and I-thou (Ich-du) differentiates between experiential engagements with the object (Ich-es) which are utilitarian and distanced, and relational encounters in which the subject and object participate in something together and perceive the fullness of each other's humanity (Ich-du).

Common to these constructions is the view that meaningful relationships can be prepared for, enhanced and supported. Edwards (2011) suggested that time and resources should be allocated to drawing out and stimulating engagement with others' perspectives, with "the meta-level aim of developing mutual recognition" (p. 38). In order to facilitate this, a collaborative autobiographical approach was chosen. In collaborative autobiographical research, "both the substantive findings and the collaborative research process are designed to 'raise consciousness'" (Butt and Raymond, 1989, p. 404), and the process provides "a route to insight, a way to build community and a means of democratising research" (Lapadat *et al.*, 2010). In the following section, we outline the design and delivery of a LGP, centring on a collaborative autobiographical exercise.

### **Methodology: a hybrid visual-autobiographic methodology within a large group process (LGP) design**

Data collection and analysis for this study took place within the format of a two-day LGP. LGPs have origins in social psychology and organisational management, and particularly within action research contexts (e.g. Lewin, 1946), where they are used to engage groups in learning and working together to address common issues and improve their conditions. Today, LGP work is a broad field comprising an array of approaches for convening groups to address important issues or problems. Despite this variety, most approaches, however, share the features of systematic design, inductive enquiry, qualitative sense-making (Tavistock Institute, nd) and an urgency to the issue at hand. Martin (2005) cautioned against off-the-shelf approaches to LGP design, and suggested that the structure of LGPs should be determined by the specific nature of the problem. A theoretical understanding of subjectivist ontology/epistemology and practical experience of group facilitation and qualitative social research methods support rigour and validity in design. A central principle of LGPs in action research is that they should work towards applied, as well as research aims: put simply, they are not simply an academic research exercise, but should promote learning and capacity building among the participant group. Validity in action research projects is gauged not only against academic research criteria, but also in terms of the extent to which these applied ends are achieved, termed catalytic validity (Lathar, 1986).

Accordingly, in addition to the research aim of understanding the experiences of individual Syrian academics in exile, we sought in our LGP design to address priorities that have arisen over the course of the SP thus far, namely, fostering successful collaboration among Syrian academics, and with their UK-based counterparts; improving the Syrian participants' ability to network and communicate internationally through the English language; and building research capacity through practical experience of collaborative qualitative research. Activities within the LGP were designed to address these priorities simultaneously and synergistically. Overall delivery of the LGP was facilitated by the UK-based authors, and supported by colleagues specialising in EAP, and a professional interpreter. Autobiographical and visual methods were used to elicit participants' stories of coming into, and life in, exile.

#### *Autobiographical research*

Although pure autobiography is primarily associated with the humanities, autobiographical approaches such as reflective writing and auto-ethnography are becoming established and well-theorised in the social sciences, especially in education. These approaches involve the researcher attending to their own experiences with the same degree of critical analysis as would be applied to those of external interlocutors in traditional qualitative research settings. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) warn that not all autobiography is scholarly, and that for autobiographical research to be valuable to others, personal experiences must be sufficiently related to public issues: "tipping too far towards the self-side produces solipsism or a confessional, and tipping too far the other way turns self-study into traditional research" (p. 14).

Autobiographical methods fall within the category of narrative approaches, which are rooted in the constructivist principle that we construct and make sense of the world through stories (narratives) – our own and those of others (Keats, 2009). In narrative research, stories might be analysed in various ways: syntactically, semantically, structurally or, as in this research, thematically.

#### *Visual methods*

Visual methods is a broad term used to describe a range of approaches in which images are a central component of the research process, whether as data, research instruments or outputs.

Visual methods are well established within some disciplines, notably anthropology and psychology, but are still comparatively uncommon within the social sciences at large. Prosser and Loxley (2008) remind us that images can signify values, culture, emotions and expectations; they therefore have the potential to support rich expression and stimulate deep reflection. When visual representation is incorporated into research interactions, “meanings [can] become tangible”, allowing the researcher to “literally see what participants are talking about” (Liebenberg, 2009, pp. 444-445). They can be particularly useful where there are language barriers, or where participants lack confidence in verbal expression. Visual materials can be “participant-generated”, “researcher-produced” or both, depending on the level of steer given by the researcher to the participant, though too much prescription might inhibit participants’ expressive thought (Prosser and Loxley, 2008). Images generated in data collection can be treated as narrative texts themselves, or as interim “go between” in the creation of verbal texts (Prosser and Loxley, 2008), with the participant and researcher working together intersubjectively to elicit meaning and insight from images. In this study, we adopted the latter approach, using graphic elicitation techniques (Bagnoli, 2009) to stimulate reflection and elicit verbal narrative texts intersubjectively. In the context of our study the participant–researcher distinction is blurred, but the epistemological principle of intersubjectivity still holds.

Timelines are used in everyday life to depict linear, chronological narratives, whether in the past or the future. This ubiquity and inherent linear temporality makes timelines an ideal and intuitive graphic format for representing autobiographical narratives. As a first task within the LGP, each of the Syrian authors worked alone to draw a timeline depicting their time in exile, from the point of their leaving Syria to the present day, and accounting for critical junctures. We were encouraged to use a meandering line rather than a straight one, for two reasons. First, this allowed for more detail to be included within the space of a single piece of A2 paper. Second, this evoked a road, a path or a river, and thus introduced a metaphorical aspect to the timeline, implicitly sanctioning the use of figurative imagery. Beyond this, no rules were prescribed: we were free to depict our experiences, whether professional or personal, using images or text annotation (English or Arabic) as we wished. An hour was allocated for this task. The resulting timelines were treated as interim visual data.

As a second task, the participants were arranged into pairs. Participants took it in turns to present their timeline verbally to their partner, explaining the significance of images where appropriate. The participant in the role of listener was tasked with prompting their partner to reflect deeply on the experiences depicted in the timeline, asking questions relating to emotional response, emerging needs, challenges, priorities and opportunities, and noting their responses on the timeline. When this process was completed for both participants, each pair then presented their timelines to the other pair sat at their table. This process lasted ninety minutes, and served to enrich the visual timelines with interim verbal data. At the same time, it provided an authentic opportunity to share experiences and perspectives with colleagues, establishing a collective frame of reference and bolstering relational understanding and trust.

The third and final stage of data generation involved writing up the annotated timelines as narrative prose. Participants were offered the choice of either writing in Arabic for subsequent translation into English, or writing directly in English with support from UK colleagues specialising in EAP. In the event, all chose the latter approach. The resulting written texts were collected at the end of the day by the facilitators, and constituted the final data set.

### **Coding and analysis of narrative data**

The second day of the LGP was dedicated to coding, analysing and presenting the data. The facilitators shared the 12 anonymised individual narrative texts with the wider group. The purpose of this was manifold: to reveal the diversity of our individual interactions with

the Syrian crisis, to practise language skills through reading and summarising text and ultimately to look at how, through thematic analysis, we as participant–researchers could begin to consider communicating our experiences to an external audience. The second day’s activities can be categorised into three stages, as follows.

*Stage 1: reading and coding*

- (1) the Syrian participant–researchers were allocated into three groups of four;
- (2) 12 anonymised individual texts were placed on each table for participants to read;
- (3) participants were asked to pick three texts (none of which should be their own); and
- (4) participants read the texts, summarising each line of text with a few keywords.

This first stage allowed participants to practise their language skills through reading for meaning, and to build vocabulary through the use of keywords to summarise sentences. This was also the beginning phase of thematic analysis, as informed by inductive coding principles (Thomas, 2006). Indeed, for many of the participants this was a new approach to research, and as such was part of the facilitators’ overall aims for learning to take place in the LGP.

*Stage 2: identifying high-level categories*

- (1) each group discussed the keywords/codes identified by individual participants;
- (2) each group identified high-level themes; and
- (3) themes were shared, compared, discussed and refined with the wider group.

The process of discussing and refining the thematic codes served as a means of inter-rater validity checking, highlighting instances of consistency and divergence in interpretation.

*Stage 3: preparing and delivering a presentation*

- (1) introduction of a presentation structure (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion (IMRAD));
- (2) groups to create a presentation following the structure;
- (3) groups to practise their presentation; and
- (4) groups to deliver their presentation to the wider SP cohort.

Participants were encouraged to structure their presentations following an IMRAD structure (e.g. Wu, 2011). This not only allowed us to allocate individuals to work on certain sections of the presentation, before bringing it together as one, but more importantly reinforced the notion of participants as researchers, by providing a tool through which we could reflect on the activities over the last two days to communicate our experiences to each other, and outwardly.

*Write-up: a final stage of analysis*

The process of writing up our presentations as narrative prose to reflect our collective experiences arguably constituted a final stage of intersubjective analysis in and of itself, in that it entailed sustained immersion in the data, through which further analytical insights arose after the LGP event had finished.

## Findings

### *Displacement and upheaval*

A profound sense of emotional distress and upheaval emerged from the narratives, particularly in relation to first leaving Syria. One participant recalled fleeing the country at short notice with their family, taking no belongings with them and with only the clothes they were wearing at the time. Others expressed sadness and difficulty in writing about this period of their lives:

In 2013 I left Syria. It was a sad experience to be forced to leave my country for the first time: nobody can imagine my emotional situation except for someone who has had the same experience.

And:

It's very sad to write about your educational journey during revolution and war, especially in Syria.

Almost all participants wrote in terms of “fleeing”, or being “forced to leave”, with varying degrees of urgency; just one participant left for reasons other than safety concerns (work) in 2013. With the exception of one participant who had fled in 2011 at the outbreak of war, participants had stayed in Syria for a number of years during the crisis. Some participants wrote of enduring air strikes, or harassment by intelligence authorities. Most left between 2013 and 2016 and one in 2017. As one participant noted, they had remained until “leaving Syria was the only choice”.

Some described difficulties in adjusting to “a new society, culture and way of life” since arriving in Turkey. For one participant, who had spent some years in Jordan in between leaving Syria and arriving in Turkey, the scale and population density in particular were a shock:

Turkey is a very big country, and too busy. It is like a vast continent, with about 70 million people in comparison with only 7 million in Jordan. With that you find a lot of pitfalls. Daily life is a drama.

Others, however, found Turkish culture to be similar to their own, and felt able to settle into their new way of life easily:

I came to Turkey towards the end of 2013. I felt as though I had been freed from a prison, as Turkey is similar to Syria.

Common across the narratives were difficulties relating to language. None of the participants could speak Turkish at the time of their arrival in Turkey, and they had had to learn alongside trying to find work and put down roots. One participant reported feeling exhausted from speaking Arabic at home, Turkish at work and trying to learn English in the evenings, while another, who had secured an academic post in a university with a high proportion of Arab and Kurdish speaking students, had to “mix three languages in Teaching”.

### *Frustration and despondency*

Several of the narratives depicted periods of intense despondency, particularly in the early stages of exile:

I fled in August 2014, and had to live with my sister's family for four months without work. I was upset and disappointed, but I had to seek any job I could to keep my self-respect.

And:

In the beginning, this new life was so challenging and exhausting. [...] I felt that my general situation got worse and worse.

Some participants wrote of their frustration at having their academic careers interrupted, with one noting that “achievement is a source of pleasure, and when you

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have barriers to your achievement you will be frustrated". Two participants had had to stop their doctoral studies:

I finished my master's degree in 2010, and published two articles in a scientific research magazine in 2010 and 2011. I began my PhD in 2011, and worked on it for one year, but I was forced to stop because of the troubles in Syria.

And:

In 2011, after four years of PhD research, the university said "you are expelled, and you can no longer finalise your dissertation". [...] As a result, I left for Jordan, without my PhD, only with my heartbreak, so I was very frustrated.

The majority of participants had encountered bureaucratic or legislative hurdles of some form or another in their attempts to reengage in academic life. Many lacked official documentation, which prevented them from applying for academic posts, while others were unable to work in public universities or for public companies due to the conditions of their work permits. The long bureaucratic process associated with issuing a formal contract had forced one participant to leave Turkey for a period:

I came to Turkey and had an interview in the faculty of tourism at [Name] University. I had to wait about three months for the higher education ministry to approve my contract with the university. During the waiting period, I went to Iraqi Kurdistan and taught at [Name] University, [but] complexities of working and residency meant I could not cope with living and teaching there. Fortunately, [Name] University eventually contacted me and told me that my contract was approved.

Another participant lost their job following the closure of their research laboratory:

I was lucky to find a job in my field, and I worked as a lab technician in a medical centre for 18 months. But this centre was closed by the Turkish government because it was unlicensed.

### *Continuing with academic life*

Employment status varied widely across the group. Some were now employed on stable contracts at Turkish universities, while others were employed on rolling, fixed-term contracts that left them feeling precarious. Others were engaged in volunteer work, others had found project work with NGOs, and others still were currently unemployed. Many found it frustrating to work in areas outside of academia, and outside their area of disciplinary expertise. For example:

When we moved to Turkey I found it hard to find work in education, particularly in my discipline. [so] I worked in a retail company as an admin officer and accountant. [This] made me feel unsatisfied because it kept me away from my disciplinary domain for more than one year.

And:

It was a big challenge for me to teach in a new language, new educational system and different faculty, as in Syria I was teaching in the Arabic language and in the economics faculty.

Those who had found work in education noted its impact on their emotional well-being:

I applied to [Name] University to be a teacher in Business administration. Although I did not earn much money, I felt so happy to stand in front of students again and teach.

And:

After two years in NGOs I returned to the academic domain in [Name] University as a business and economics lecturer, which brought the joy of teaching and standing in front of the students back into my life.

[...] while others who had found work with NGOs that utilised their expertise for relief work felt a similar sense of relief and fulfilment:

In August 2016 I was interviewed and accepted for a job in an INGO [relating to] livelihoods and agriculture in particular. At that moment I felt that a door had been opened.

And:

In September 2013 [...] I left Syria to go and work for an organization in the field of charity and humanitarian aid for Syrian people in Turkey. During that time I had warm feelings.

Some participants had crossed the border back into Syria since taking residence in Turkey in order to teach in universities. One participant, who had initially fled to Turkey in 2013, had returned to Syria in 2015 to take on a teaching role for two years. They described feelings of duty and pride:

One reason for returning to Syria was to teach in [Name] University. I felt it was very important for me to teach [there], because I have a PhD degree [and] my students can benefit from my knowledge. [During] that time I was very proud of myself, and thought I was doing my duty.

Another recounted their experiences of setting up a new university with colleagues prior to fleeing Syria, in order to deliver higher education to students whose formal studies had been interrupted:

At that time there was less money, but good relationships between colleagues, and between teachers and students, because we were working as volunteers and our students appreciated highly the knowledge and treatment they received.

Others wrote about other areas of academic life, such as publishing research articles or monographs. For one participant, this evoked feelings of happiness, but was tempered with sadness due to other aspects of their identity being suppressed:

In 2015 I published my first article in English in an international journal, and at the start of 2018 I published my first book in the Turkish language, with a Turkish co-author. I was both very happy, and very sad. To publish a book is a good achievement for an academic, but it was not in my mother tongue (Kurdish) as this was prevented by law. Nor was it in my second mother tongue (Arabic), the language that I have always studied in.

Another participant recounted his efforts to get his academic career back on track “from zero”:

I decided to be optimistic and forget the past, and made the critical decision to start a new PhD from zero at Jordanian university, despite the high cost. I got funding and started the PhD in parallel with an MBA. It was very three hard and challenging years [during which] I had to write a thesis in Islamic law and a dissertation in administration simultaneously. It is very rare, but incredibly, I completed successfully in 2016.

The majority of participants marked their joining the Cara SP on their timelines of their time in exile. Some, particularly those who had only recently joined the SP (and for whom this was their first residential event), wrote in terms of anticipated benefits, while others wrote of the benefit they had already gained from the programme. For example:

At a critical moment I heard about the Cara Programme from colleagues, and applied and was accepted. [Since joining] I have felt reborn. This programme helps me to work in a team and improve my English and academic skills, especially in scientific writing so I can prepare my work for publication.

And:

My improvement was not too noticeable for the first three months, between February and May 2017 when the tutor started to help me [with] English language by through the weekly online sessions. [But] my English language has improved well in the last ten months, and now I believe I can speak more

easily and confidently than before my involvement in the CARA programme. As a consequence of participation in this programme (the online sessions, the webinars and the workshops) some essential things have progressively improved, such as English language [and] academic writing skills.

### *Hope for the future*

Participants wrote of their hopes and aspirations for the future. Two of the participants planned to leave Turkey and continue their academic careers abroad, whether in the UK, Canada, “or any country”. Of these participants, one believed it was necessary to move if they were “to find a role in [their] disciplinary domain in research and teaching”. Others were more committed to continuing their academic development in Turkey:

Carrying out a PhD in one of the Turkish universities [...] would be a good option [for me].

And:

I have changed my priorities. I am planning to do a PhD [here] because it seems to me that it will open many doors in Turkey in particular. It would mean I could access the Turkish [job] market. I see myself teaching in future.

Two participants who had only recently joined the Cara SP wrote of their expectations of the programme, based on the recommendations of peers. One participant wrote that they had “got involved with the hope of keeping in touch with colleagues, whether Syrian or international”. Others discussed their future plans in terms of making the most of a difficult situation:

Overall, it is not easy time in life. However with some support from CARA I’m managing to survive and stay alive.

And:

The point is how can you organise your life, and make it easy.

Despite its having arisen as a major concern at other Cara events, and perhaps because of the focus on personal experiences in this particular LGP, only one participant addressed the issue of Syria’s future directly in their narrative. They wrote of their Syrian students’ being a source of inspiration, and a reason to be optimistic about the future:

I was happy and full of hope, especially when looking into my students’ eyes. I believe we can recover Syria, and rebuild our institutions.

### **Reflective evaluation of the large group process**

Reflective evaluation was conducted via an online video conference, lasting 90 min, during which the Syrian and UK-based authors shared thoughts regarding the outcomes of the LGP and needs going forward. Notes were taken and circulated for checking and further elaboration.

The Syrian authors’ reflective evaluations of the LGP centred around the interrelated themes of collaboration, time constraints and skills development. With regard to the former, many noted that collaboration of this kind was a new experience; there was no culture of collaborative research in Syrian academia, particularly not with colleagues of different status or disciplinary background, and we were generally accustomed to solitary scholarship. Handling and negotiating different ideas and perspectives, and working towards consensus in depicting our collective circumstances, was thus an unfamiliar and challenging experience for many of us, but ultimately a valuable one. Having time to share and learn about each other’s experiences of coming into and living in exile led us to mutual understanding and recognition.

Related to this, we discussed the issue of a broader lack of trust among Syrians, which presented barriers to collaboration between individuals and communities. Working with non-Syrians, who can adopt a neutral status (which is declared explicitly by Cara), can help to broker and foster collaborations that might not otherwise occur, or which might break down due to mistrust. However, it was noted that mistrust of foreigners can also be an issue following the crisis, and that this might present its own obstacles in some circumstances. It is important therefore to make concerted efforts to build trust both within the Syrian academic community and between Syrian academics and non-Syrian counterparts, but also to be realistic about what can be achieved, and at what pace: building trust and mutual understanding takes time.

From the perspective of the UK-based authors, bearing witness to our colleagues' stories has afforded us a more nuanced understanding of their needs, challenges and aspirations, which, in turn, has led to a clearer understanding of the roles we can play in supporting them. It has thrown our comparatively comfortable experiences as academics working in resource-rich UK universities in peacetime, into stark relief. We believe it is vital that academics in exile lead in setting their academic development agenda in line with their lived experiences, and that international partners act responsively and supportively. Group processes that involve all stakeholders and work inductively to elicit relational understanding can ward against top-down intervention and promote needs-driven collaboration.

There was a shared frustration among Syrian and UK-based authors about the time constraints of the SP, and a feeling that the residential events were not long enough to fully develop collaborative project ideas. After each residential event ends and the community disperses, the challenges of daily life inevitably consume our time, and projects are set aside and often not seen through. For one female participant in particular, childcare and other domestic responsibilities are all-consuming and leave her with little time and energy to devote to academic work. Without a team within which to share tasks and responsibilities, undertaking research was simply not feasible in her current circumstances.

For the UK-based authors who work on the Cara SP on a voluntary basis, time spent on the programme needs to be made up elsewhere. There is little slack in our schedules, particularly at certain points of the year, and as with our Syrian colleagues sustaining momentum after residential events can be difficult. Cara's role as a coordinator is crucial in ensuring that deadlines are met and communication is maintained. Some Syrian authors were less concerned about completing specific projects, and instead spoke in terms of longitudinal benefit. One spoke metaphorically of planting seeds at residential events, which would grow and bear fruit later on. Others saw the activities undertaken on the SP as opportunities to acquire new skills and ways of working. On this occasion, many saw value in gaining practical experience of qualitative research and analysis, which for some was directly applicable to our existing work. For others it has provided an insight into colleagues' ways of working, helping us to understand research practice across disciplinary boundaries, and even to consider where different research traditions might converge and compliment each other.

Building research capacity was a stated objective of the LGP, based on earlier needs analyses (see Cara, 2016; Parkinson, forthcoming). From the perspective of the UK-based authors, who designed and facilitated the LGP, our colleagues engaged intuitively in authentic qualitative research, and in some cases were considering applying the techniques learned in their own research, confirms to us the value of the activities and assured us that this objective was being addressed. We are mindful, however, that for some this type of research sits outside of their expertise and research interests, and that if we are to address anxieties surrounding deskilling we must identify and develop opportunities for engaging in disciplinary research. This is no small task given the

resource needs of, for example, experimental scientific research, and will require coordination between a range of regional and international stakeholders. Yet this highlights again the value of nurturing relational agency and expertise on the SP, to support effective collaboration across diverse actors.

### **Developing relational understanding**

While the data generated in this study pertain to the past experiences of the Syrian authors, the study's objectives are future oriented. The theme of this special issue has focussed our thinking towards the future of Syrian higher education – both short term and long term, both inside Syria and in exile – and the challenges it will entail. In the short term, it is vital that the Syrian academic community in exile remains cohesive despite being geographically dispersed. Syrian academics and their international partners must develop ways of working together to sustain academic activity and develop strategies and resources for the present and future.

The professional contexts from which Edwards' (2011) concepts of relational agency and relational expertise were originally developed differ significantly from the SP. Nonetheless, there are clear points of analogy that support the conceptual utility of relational approaches here. First, the diverse SP community comprises individuals with different disciplinary expertise and professional norms. Second, the problems and issues at hand are highly complex and thus prone to interpretation from different disciplinary perspectives.

The need for mutual recognition and “common knowledge” developed in “boundary spaces” (Edwards, 2011, p. 37) between different stakeholders' understandings is therefore crucial. The LGP depicted in this study provided a framework for facilitating authentic collaboration among a diverse group of Syrian academics in exile. Incorporating collaborative autobiographical research had the threefold advantages of eliciting common knowledge from individuals' experiences, building capacity in qualitative research and analysis techniques, and stimulating sustained engagement across disciplinary and other boundaries. Collectively, these features helped the Syrian authors to overcome cultural and situational barriers to collaboration and build relational agency and expertise.

The concepts of relational agency and expertise are also pertinent to the transcultural dimension of the SP. Syrian higher education was comparatively isolationist prior to the crisis, and international collaboration was uncommon. As a result, there can be a disconnect in understandings of academic practice between Syrian academics on the SP and their UK colleagues, whose experience is rooted in the resource-rich and heavily internationalised context of UK higher education. Furthermore, linguistic and cultural differences constitute “boundary spaces” where common knowledge is needed to support effective collaboration between Syrian and UK colleagues on the SP, and, looking beyond the immediate context, to support international collaboration in the future. Although the UK-based authors served primarily as facilitators during the LGP itself, this gave way to less role-bound engagement in the subsequent reflective evaluation and write-up stages, further developing common knowledge and fostering relational understanding.

Based on our experiences of the SP, in order to sustain academic communities in exile we recommend that time and resources be devoted to the development of relational agency and expertise. It would be remiss, however, not to acknowledge that the resource requirements for activities of the kind documented in this paper are considerable, and likely far beyond the reach of exiled communities without outside support. It is therefore essential that the international academic community recognises and acts upon its responsibility to support those in crisis. NGOs such as Cara provide nodes at which strategies can be formulated relationally by those in need and their collaborators, and through which external support can be coordinated and allocated.

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# Yemen and education

## Shaping bottom-up emergent responses around tribal values and customary law

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to draw from up-to-date reports that outline the current situation for Yemen in terms of education and the socio-political context, and to address this context with theory from the complexity science domain in order to propose practical recommendations.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper outlines highlights from the current situation in Yemen, namely, the challenges presented by conflict, and international engagement in conflict, and offers an appraisal of key factors pertaining to education and progress made in this arena in recent years. A focus is made on tribal groups as a starting point for bottom-up emergent engagement, and complexity science is suggested as a theoretical domain to draw from to conceptualise how to enact this.

**Findings** – A discussion of how complexity science could be meaningfully applied to the case of education in Yemen is presented, along with seven recommendations for the focus of future international aid interventions in Yemen.

**Originality/value** – At this time, there are few, if no, other works that have been found that have considered the case of education in Yemen in this way from the perspective of a bottom-up emergent engagement with tribes as a way of leveraging the values-based system of tribal customary law in order to address sustainability development goals, literacy, integration in digital society and education as a means of approaching these issues.

**Keywords** Yemen, Education, Conflict, Tribes, Complexity science, Customary law

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

“To the oppressed, and to those who suffer with them and fight at their side” (Freire, 1970)

This paper focusses on the complex, socio-political context of education as a humanitarian and economic issue in Yemen, drawing from UNESCO, and other recent, politically analytical reports, and proposes a conceptual perspective to be taken grounded in complexity science and the work of Freire. An attempt has been made to present a new approach exploring the context of education in Yemen, suggesting what elements of complexity science could apply to the Yemeni situation as a starting point for an approach to intervention. This conceptual review paper, based on a domain which suffers from a paucity of literature as applied to Yemen, argues that such a perspective would more greatly enable a bottom-up emergent response for social, economic and potentially sustainable environmental development to take place, inclusive of tribal entities within Yemen as part of an ongoing socio-politically evolving conversation, enhancing and empowering the agency of tribal peoples rather than reducing it. Complexity science is offered as a suggestion of a theoretical paradigm that could offer a useful starting point in response to cited work that recommends a “bottom-up” solution in harmony with the tribal system in response to Yemen’s problems.

The nature and content of this paper is situated in the much larger domain of education and international development, which, although not thoroughly presented as a basis from which the paper is derived, it provides an underlying set of guiding principles. For example, a core assumption of this paper is that “development” is a process of positive change over time without a single model or goal, given nuance and character by the “specific political and moral positionings brought to it by its users” (McCowan and Unterhalter, 2015). Pertinent thematics of education and international development present in this case study of



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Yemen include: economic growth, inequalities, conflict, and community, among others (McCowan and Unterhalter, 2015). This paper implies such development is needed in Yemen urgently to refocus the outcomes of current ongoing conflicts there, and that this could be achieved through education in a bottom-up style through the tribal system. This rests on a fundamental pairing of relationships observed between education and international development: that “development includes education”, and that “education drives development” (McCowan and Unterhalter, 2015).

The paper therefore first outlines the context of Yemen, its educational situation and needs, followed by a consideration of complexity science, the work of Freire and other implications for practice that could add value to the current social, economic and other needs of Yemen as seen through the perspective of educational intervention at the grassroot level. Finally, a discussion of how complexity science could be meaningfully applied to the case of education in Yemen is presented, along with seven recommendations for the focus of future international aid interventions in Yemen. The scope of this paper does not, however, extend to a comparison of differences between tribal society and administrative society in-depth. The elements of the tribal composition and its features that are mentioned here are those of immediate relevance to the discussion presented. A greater in-depth analysis, presentation and comparison of Yemeni tribal society vs administrative society is the subject matter for another paper requiring a different methodological starting point, and not dealt with here.

## Yemen

The Republic of Yemen is found at the south of the Arabian Peninsula in Western Asia/Northern Africa, bordered by Saudi Arabia, Oman and the sea. With a population of more than 27m people, UNESCO (2016) classifies Yemen as one of 50 lower-middle income and one of 13 conflict-affected countries, with an annual growth rate of 2.3 per cent. It is one of 50 nations categorised as a “Least Developing Country” (LDC) by the United Nations (UN) due to low gross national income, so-called “weak human assets” and a high degree of economic vulnerability, and is thus deemed among the “world’s most impoverished and vulnerable countries” (The Nations Online Project, 2018). It is also a country in the fourth year of a complex civil war between a group called the Houthis on one side, supported by Iran, and a group on the other side led by the President and the ruling elite, supported by Saudi Arabia and the USA – a civil war which has so far been responsible for more than 10,000 deaths (BBC, 2017). Yemen is subject to ongoing counterterrorism campaigns, weak governance and is populated by a mainly tribal society on the brink of famine, which was recently brought to its knees by a cholera epidemic affecting a million people (Dewan and Pettersson, 2017; OCHA, 2018). The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office advise against all travel to the country.

In the midst of ongoing and intense conflict in Yemen, recent reports have attempted to unpick the dynamics of what is often broadly labelled as a terrorist threat, set in the more nuanced context of relationships between Yemeni tribes, Al-Qaeda Arab Peninsula (AQAP) “militants”, Yemeni politics and society (Al-Dawsari, 2018). In addition to recent political turmoil and civil war, Yemen has endured hundreds of US airstrikes as part of the US counterterrorism campaign against Al-Qaeda generally, and AQAP in particular, and, although largely rejecting and pushing back against AQAP’s “radical and violent ideology” – while also sometimes joining forces against the Houthi with them – local tribes have had their authority challenged by AQAP and also seen some of their people join the group – meanwhile the Yemeni ruling elite have been seen to fail in confronting AQAP and, at the same time, also instigate the civil war (Al-Dawsari, 2018). AQAP recruit tribal youth, marginalised without economic prospects, offering status and material gain (Al-Dawsari, 2018). The tribes, being left seemingly to fend for themselves in this complex and chaotic backdrop, have been seen to use “peaceful conflict resolution to deal with

AQAP threats, and resort to force only in what they assess as particularly dire circumstances and when they have exhausted all other options” and, as Al-Dawsari (2018) argues, have helped to limit the spread of AQAP, therefore making the tribes a “key to countering the group effectively”.

Instead of continuing airstrikes, a “bottom-up” emergent approach has been recommended as a key solution in resolving conflict in the country, engaging hand in hand with Yemeni tribes (who are recognised as operating within a well-developed system of rules, rights and obligations), in order to not only strengthen security but also improve living conditions and address a wide range of issues, including humanitarian and economic needs (Al-Dawsari, 2018). It is a key argument of this paper that advancement in the educational domain could also be sought at this emergent point of tribal engagement, and that a synthesis of theoretical models offered by the work of Freire and complexity science might provide the foundation from which to lead such an endeavour.

### **Humanitarian, economic need and education in Yemen**

Humanitarian and economic needs of course include education. For those children that make it to school age in the Republic, compulsory education is held to be legally mandated between the ages of 6 and 15, and free education is supposed to be provided for 6 years in primary, and for 3 at secondary level (UNESCO, 2016). Pre-primary in Yemen refers to 3–5 year olds (intended therefore for 2.233m of the population), primary is meant to cater for 6–11 (4.051m), while lower secondary means 12–14 years, upper secondary is 15–17 (3.662m) and tertiary or higher education is for 18–22 year olds (2.926m of the population) (UNESCO, 2016). The same UNESCO (2016) report shows that although there are 17.1 per cent of pupils over-age for their grade in Yemen, only 63 per cent of pupils between 2009 and 2014 completed their primary education. In total, 90 per cent of students were recorded as making an effective transition from primary to lower secondary in general education in the school year in 2013, and a total of 1,768,000 students enrolled into secondary education in the school year ending 2014, with only 40 per cent of those being female. Finally though, while 45 per cent of students completed lower secondary, only 30 per cent completed upper secondary education from 2009 to 2014, and participation in technical and vocational education programmes was practically non-existent (UNESCO, 2016). At each level of education, there are significantly fewer females enrolled than males, and of the recorded 583,000 out-of-school children for the school year ending in 2014, 73 per cent of those were female (UNESCO, 2016).

The UNESCO (2016) report showed an 89 per cent youth literacy rate for the age group 15–24 in Yemen, but, in real terms, highlighted the 623,000 illiterate youths from the same age range, 87 per cent of who were female. Adult literacy for the same period (2005–2014) stood at the lower figure of 69 per cent, with 4,849,000 adults being recorded as illiterate: 75 per cent of those being female. While the Yemeni education system does have a nationally representative learning assessment in early grades (2 or 3) of primary education, it does not have one at the end of primary education. In terms of percentage of pupils in these early primary grades achieving a minimum proficiency level, while there were no data available at all for reading scores, only 8 per cent of pupils from 2009 to 2014 obtained the minimum standard in mathematics (UNESCO, 2016). Emphasising the impact of this low level numerical ability on the economy and society, only a very small minority of adults in Yemen have been found to be financially literate: “A Standard & Poor’s module with numeracy-based questions related to interest, compound interest, inflation and risk diversification was attached to the Gallup World Poll and administered in more than 140 countries in 2014. The survey defined people as financially literate if they correctly answered questions on at least three of these four financial concepts. It found that 33 per cent of adults worldwide were financially literate, from a low of 13% in Yemen to a high of 71% in Norway” (Klapper *et al.*, 2015, in UNESCO, 2016). The Yemeni primary-school-mathematics-to-adult-financial-literacy-pipeline therefore requires immediate attention.

Based on data representing the 2012–2015 period, no standards are seen to be set and enforced in Yemen on the pupil/teacher ratio in public early childhood education institutions (World Bank SABER early childhood development country reports, in UNESCO, 2016), implying class sizes could be high – no data on class sizes are available in this instance. Government expenditure on primary education in Yemen as a percentage of GDP per capita was 19.4 per cent in 2014, while it was 12.6 per cent for secondary education. Of expenditure on primary in education in public institutions, 3.4 per cent was spent on primary textbooks and teaching materials, and 93 per cent was spent on teaching staff salaries – however, while priorities for budgets are on staffing costs, it might not logically follow that this represents sufficient numbers of teachers employed – again, no data on numbers relating to teacher staffing are available.

A UNAID 2011 report highlighted that “In 32 countries, fewer than half of schools provide life skills-based HIV education” – in Yemen, the figure was less than 5 per cent (UNESCO, 2016). The UNESCO (2016) report had no data for Yemen for adult ICT skills or adult educational attainment, but did point out that only 53 per cent of schools had toilets or sanitation facilities including basic drinking water installed, and that 16.7 per cent of females married between the ages of 15 and 19, and 58 per cent of girls had teen pregnancies. A total of 16,900 students were recorded as being enrolled as internationally mobile students (outbound) in tertiary education in the school year ending 2014, indicating that some Yemeni students did make it to universities abroad.

Of those that have made it out of the conflict zone, scholarship programmes might be helping, but could equally perhaps do more. As a means of providing higher education opportunities for “suitably prepared youth and adults from developing countries who would otherwise not be able to afford them” scholarship programmes provide a significant boost (UNESCO, 2016). In Yemen’s case, however, it begs the question as to how “well prepared” all youth and adults could be given the current circumstances and perhaps requires a review of how preparedness for such programmes could be increased. In terms of number of scholarships awarded, Yemen has an outbound mobility ratio of approximately 5 per cent and compares poorly with quite a few other least developed countries, for example, Djibouti and Bhutan, which both had ratios of 40 per cent. Other LDCs also performing better than Yemen in this regard were Mauritania, Malawi, Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, CAR and Nepal (UNESCO, 2016). This suggests that more scholarship programmes and initiatives could be launched to focus on the Republic of Yemen more specifically.

Biases against economic aid-driven models of development notwithstanding, Yemen does receive substantial aid to education: the 2002–2003 annual average was US\$44m, in 2013 US\$89m and in 2014 US\$95m – figures which are still quite low, however, compared with aid received by Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Tunisia and Turkey, for example (UNESCO, 2016) - it’s always worth noting how much aid ex-commonwealth countries receive compared with others.

In spite of these data and the previously mentioned tremendous difficulties and challenges ongoing politically and conflict-wise in the region, Yemen was among 50 countries selected in a UNESCO review based on those that achieved strong progress in education and literacy during the period between 2000 and 2015, and was identified as “a symbol of global progress and wider literacy efforts” (UNESCO, 2017). The spread of literacy in Western Asia and Northern Africa has been linked with the “demand for political freedom and socio-economic development expressed by young people in these regions”, suggesting its important role in democratisation and stabilisation (UNESCO, 2017). A greater investment of aid in the form of scholarship programmes and preparedness for them would arguably therefore be a worthy investment – one of potentially greater value to re-engage marginalised tribal youth who are too easily conscripted by AQAP, a risk otherwise mitigated by the vicious circle of more airstrikes.

UNESCO (2017) findings have led to the recognition and acknowledgement of “The complexity and variety of literacy and its connection with the whole of life at individual and societal levels” which has allowed the organisation to encourage “stronger intersectoral

collaboration among stakeholders as part of broader educational efforts". In this way, literacy has come to be understood "as a means of communication conditioned by its socio-political context that will continue to evolve, whereby the sustainable development agenda, lifelong learning and the digital society are important influencing factors" (UNESCO, 2017). These intellectual aims make sense but are seemingly bold and ambitious given the current context on the ground in Yemen. The stakeholders include an array of people representing "traditional" and tribal values, where girls are frequently out of school, marry and give birth young, and have a great chance of being illiterate, in addition to much of the population only completing primary level education. As stated above, three-quarters of adults reporting as illiterate are female. Perhaps it is sadly not surprising therefore that 49 per cent of Yemeni women aged 15–49 say a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife for at least one of five reasons (e.g. burning the food) (UNESCO, 2016). These gender inequalities are known to compound into women also agreeing that "a university education is more important for boys than girls, and that men have more right to jobs when they are scarce" (Bhatkal, 2014, in UNESCO, 2016), all of which are well-established indicators that have a direct impact on gender equality in and outside education (UNICEF, 2014c; Loaiza and Liang, 2013 – both in UNESCO, 2016).

Adolescent birth rates, or teen pregnancies, are used as an indicator by the Demographic and Health Survey to show how effective education is, as judged against so-called "desirable development outcomes". In figures illustrated in the UNESCO (2017) report, the trend is that adolescent birth rates are highest in those with no education at all, less high for females with only primary education, lower for girls with secondary education and lower still or non-existent for those with higher education – this holds true for data provided on Yemen, where per 1,000 women, figures from the year 1997 approximated 125 adolescent births for girls with no education at all, just over 100 for girls with primary schooling, slightly more than 50 girls with a secondary education and 0 for women with higher education. These numbers improved by 2013 overall, but there was a slight rise for women attending higher education having given birth. As a whole, these statistics compared favourably with much higher adolescent birth rates found for girls in Madagascar, Cameroon, Peru and Haiti, for instance, but not as well as Pakistan – the only country with lower adolescent birth rates in the group of countries compared. The same UNESCO (2017) report provided reference to a similar set of indicator data, based on under 5 mortality rates, of deaths per 1,000 live births. The data show clearly a lower rate of infant mortality with greater levels of education – in Yemen, these data saw great improvement from 1997 to 2013. So while some statistics are deeply concerning, others offer hope – hope that as in neighbouring Arab countries, the opportunity that advancement in education in general and for women in education, in particular, might be a possibility.

Juxtaposed with the cultural and social challenges of education in Yemen are the essentialist and physical threats of attacks to education, which can come in a variety of forms, and which, in Yemen, have occurred between 500 and 999 times in the period between 2009 and 2012, which UNESCO (2016) lists as including:

- "Any intentional threat or use of force, including those directed at students and educators, at education institutions, including recruitment into armed groups";
- "On the way to or from an education institution because of someone's status as a student or educator";
- "Directed at activists, including teacher union members, as well as education personnel and education aid workers"; and
- "Schools, teachers and students are often directly attacked, whether by state security forces or non-state armed groups, for political, military, ideological or sectarian reasons".

Also of note is the potential military use of schools which takes place in many places around the world.

Effects of direct attacks, risks of attacks or a wider general effect of an accompanying climate of fear and instability can paralyse whole education systems, forcing schools to close, discouraging student attendance and teacher recruitment (UNESCO, 2016). Another side effect of conflict and such an unstable environment is displaced individuals or refugees. Although refugees are seen to present a significant challenge for the education system (UNESCO, 2016), available data suggest that refugees in Yemen fare above average in terms of school enrolment rates globally. For example, “Data remain limited for many refugee situations, but the most recent data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimate that, worldwide, 50 per cent of primary school-age refugee children are out of school and 75 per cent of adolescent refugees at secondary level are out of school. Refugee children and adolescents are five times more likely to be out of school than their non-refugee peers. However, this average obscures significant differences across countries. Primary enrolment rates among the displaced are 80 per cent in Egypt and Yemen” (UNESCO, 2016). This could suggest that due to the extremely impoverished state of the country, refugees may well be living on a par with other Yemeni people, and therefore not be as severely disadvantaged by comparison – a levelling of social inequality perhaps.

However, if the aforementioned recommendation by Al-Dawsari (2018) to engage more in an emergent bottom-up way with the tribes were acted upon, perhaps the educational agenda could be addressed by this route as well, with literacy at its heart and encompassing a broader range of educational aims. This would start from recognition that the “Demand for literacy is an integral part of pursuing the SDGs, requiring purposeful and ongoing intersectoral collaboration” (UNESCO, 2017).

As stated above, education in this way might be understood “as a means of communication conditioned by its socio-political context that will continue to evolve”, whereby the sustainable development agenda, lifelong learning and the digital society are important influencing factors” (UNESCO, 2017). The need for a useful paradigm therefore arises through which to conceptualise these aims in the context of Yemen. One such paradigm is afforded by complexity science.

### **Complexity science**

Perhaps the most appropriate theoretical lens from which to begin to articulate such a vision of bottom-up emergent educational engagement with tribal peoples is one enhanced by complexity science. Certainly, the “bottom up emergent” direct engagement with key actors, in this case Yemeni tribal people and groups, is encapsulated through the model provided by complex adaptive systems (CAS) theory (Dooley, 1996).

Academics and practitioners in the domain of organisational science have applied principles of complexity science and the CAS to the way both organisations and the people in them interact and operate (Beinhocker, 1998, 2001; Horgan, 1995; Pascale, 2001; Plexus, 1998a, b; Regine, 1998; Wolf *et al.*, 2008; Pasher and Webb, 2008; Webb and Lettice, 2005b, 2003). The CAS theory posits that individuals and factors of influence within and between systems are agents in co-evolving interaction with each other, and that, over time, their interactions lead to a variety of outcomes. Six important elements at play that require acknowledgement as dynamic properties of such emergent systems include: diversity, history and time, the edge of chaos, self-organisation and emergence, unpredictability and pattern recognition. These six principles can be loosely defined thus (Webb *et al.*, 2004, 2006; Webb and Lettice, 2005a):

- (1) Self-organisation and emergence: groups of people show self-organising behaviour and can be supported by an enabling environment. Self-organisation means that arising from the interactions between people, some outcomes can seem to emerge without being planned, i.e. that single agents of a system or group seem to develop a

structure bottom-up on their own, without having a master-plan or an observational guider telling them how to organise. Implications for application in the Yemen context include:

- The tribal structures based on values and customary law influence the way people respond to news, development and information, as well as their response to education. In this sense, the self-organising and emergent interplay of Yemeni tribal members in accordance with these factors can be the focus for how change and intervention is approached for educational purposes.
- Rather than planning educational intervention with the elite governmental bodies in a top-down way, the locus for planning and implementation should be among the tribal system itself.

(2) Edge of chaos: the edge of chaos is not a physical place, but rather as a mid-point between complete anarchy on the one hand, and rigid control and strong order on the other. It can be interpreted as the balance between structure and flexibility that a group of people needs to become thrive for optimum levels of creative spontaneity – whether than be in social groups or organised networks in society or in or between organisations. In complexity science, the edge of chaos, i.e. the zone between complete stability and complete chaos, is a metaphorical area, where a system could be defined as being the most productive. Implications for application in the Yemen context include:

- Tribal systems based on autonomous interacting families organised in a non-state, non-hierarchical manner should not be deemed to be anarchic.
- Such systems should be acknowledged for the dynamic possibilities afforded by more flexible structuring and potentially more responsive to initiating change in fluid ways in line with their own values and as an extension of these.
- Such systems of people should be approached as creative entities who can respond to issues in spontaneous ways.
- Linking through to the work of Freire (1970), this would lay the basis for a stepping stone to “critical consciousness”, often perceived by some as “anarchic” or with the potential to “lead to disorder”, but, in this case, a vital component of an approach which would embrace and utilise the creative potential of the Yemeni tribal system. Freire here advocates not confusing “freedom with the maintenance of the status quo” (Freire, 1970) – the potential of the “edge of chaos” as a “sweet pot of change and innovation” would maximise the potential of change within a fluid system, more than could possibly be achieved where the desired result was to maintain the status quo.

(3) Diversity: in economic terms, networks and groups of people or organisations need to understand and leverage the diverse set of agents or people among them to be successful and to enable effective and desirable structures to emerge. For example, in companies where innovation is required as part of sustainable business development, this can mean that the right mix of people is indispensable for innovation and creativity. Self-organising teams are believed to be able to thrive and flourish if team member strengths and weaknesses are maximised; it is the combination of different abilities that makes such a system creative, but also robust. Implications for application in the Yemen context include:

- Problems arising from social inequalities in Yemen need to be viewed through the flattening lens of diversity.

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- The diversity in Yemen, for example, includes: tribal entities, state organised governmental systems, gender inequalities, marginalised youth being radicalised for AQAP and refugees.
  - This diversity needs to be represented at the decision-making table in a mode that would leverage co-evolutionary responses to problem solving and education.
- (4) History and time: all groups of people and networks have a sense of historicity. This means that, although the future behaviour of a group of people cannot be extrapolated from the past or predicted, the past of this system is still important for its present and future position – sensitivity to initial conditions is another related concept of strong relevance. Implications for application in the Yemen context include:
- The issues that have led to marginalisation of certain groups and individuals that have evolved into AQAP need to be brought to bear in co-creating future paths that respond to such underlying factors.
  - Individual memories of painful experiences from, for example, conflict and gender based inequalities, need to be handled sensitively, and possibly through psycho-dynamic therapeutic methods.
  - Healing from such pain will take a lot of time.
  - Appreciative inquiry focussed on what good has been done needs also to be exercised and built upon so as to provide a strong foundation for future action.
  - Linking again to the work of Freire (1970), his concept of “conscientizacao”, i.e. “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions” and taking “action against oppressive elements of reality”, his approach would advocate “making it possible for people to enter the historical process as responsible subjects”, enrolling individuals in the “search for self-affirmation”.
- (5) Unpredictability: the notion of unpredictability implies that the development of a group, society or network cannot be foreseen, i.e. not extrapolated from past behaviour (see above) and not calculated on the basis of linear cause–effect relationships – although a strategic plan may set out clear objectives based on the stakeholders identified in the plan, many unforeseen eventualities may arise, leaving to the need for a response to the emergent, and the potential to embrace unplanned opportunities should they arise. Implications for application in the Yemen context include:
- Recognition needs to be given to the external contributors to the ongoing conflict in Yemen and the amount of power they hold over the stability or instability of the region of Yemen.
  - These external players, such as Iran’s influence and support of the Houthis, or British commercial supply of weaponry that is used in the Yemen conflict, or American airstrikes, will continue to pose a threat to the stability in the region unless they are also engaged at the table of decision-making diversity.
  - Countless other potential actors and factors contributing to unpredictable occurrences cannot be foreseen; hence, their unpredictability, for example, the risk of further outbreaks of cholera, or other humanitarian crises, or other international military threats hitherto unanticipated.
  - A flattened-hierarchical framework or model for emergent response to rapid and unpredicted change needs to be co-created within Yemen at all levels of tribal society and other state actors therefore, due to its dynamic and fluid social state.

- (6) Pattern recognition: behaviour between people and groups shows patterns over time. In the natural sciences, these patterns can, for example, be observed in a flock of birds or the complex structures of bee hives. In the context of human behaviour, this can be made evident by friendships, family ties and groupings of like-minded people or those with the same interests, in the emergence of social entrepreneurship, small- to medium-sized enterprises or simply the emergence of solutions to problems through innovation. Implications for application in the Yemen context include:
- Naturally occurring relationships such as recognised through the Yemeni tribal system grounded in customary law and values need to be acknowledged as the locus of interaction and negotiation from which to attempt to co-create and co-evolve educational futures - not from the outside-in, but at grassroots level.
  - The elite governing class that many in the country report feeling abandoned by are not the appropriate system in Yemen that should be used from which to organise and administer meaningful change.
  - The elite governing class might well consider a change in perception of their own role in future that acts as an enabler for bottom-up structures to emerge through the tribal system, and perhaps to initiate a step change that allows their administrating and organising bodies to facilitate this through participative dialogue.

By way of summary and in extension of the above, it becomes possible to say therefore that different constellations of system diversity and the affordance of network interactions between diverse agents within the system lead to different patterns and possible outcomes that are often historically dependent, and will unravel in unpredictable ways over the continuance of time. Agent interactions might well be planned, but their interactions also lead to side-effects and to self-organising emergent patterns in behaviour and outcomes over time. In this sense, and if this theoretical view is adopted, it is essential to facilitate and enable key agents within systems to interact as optimally as possible with other agents in order to maximise potential outcomes between them, in harmony with key objectives. In this way, diversity needs not to be managed, but to be navigated and leveraged, across all levels of society, by individually empowered actors (Webb, 2008b).

While applied to human systems this also requires power differentials to be recognised and acknowledged: humans with power and influence often interact with other powerful and influential humans and sometimes therefore the less powerful and influential can be marginalised in society. If a theoretical starting point to system and process design takes this into account, however, it is possible to ensure that power and influence become more freely distributed within a system. Ensuring this is focussed on desirable outcomes for Yemen, such as education, sexual equality and poverty eradication, for example, rather than undesirable outcomes such as marginalisation, crime, terrorism, conflict, famine and cholera is essential.

For human systems, the CAS theory goes so far (Webb *et al.*, 2007). It would emphasise the importance of networks, and, in Yemen's case for a humanitarian and economic system design, would put the focus on trying to establish bottom-up emergent potential of, for example, tribal parties, in projects including those with knowledge, skills and experience in the sustainable development agenda, lifelong learning and the digital society in order to allow these to be able to flourish. The agency of those within the system, including tribal leaders and members, would shape the communication defining the socio-political context that would continue to evolve in a hybrid and fluid way.

In this context, participative dialogue and communication would be theoretically seen as manifestation of conversations between the diverse agents in the Yemeni system – a view held

by Stacey's theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey *et al.*, 2000; Stacey, 2000, 2001, 2003a, b, c). Stacey's view also postulates the perspective that there is no system boundary and that all interactions over time are just conversations between diverse people, whose diversity is defined by a range of characteristics, including power and influence, and the outcomes of interactions between such diverse people are influenced by who talks to who, or who does not talk to who, in addition to knowledge, skills, motives, intentions and a wide array of psycho-dynamic factors besides. Stacey further argues that the principles of complexity science mentioned above can also help to inform the very haphazard way outcomes are often reached, beleaguered by misunderstanding and unintentional occurrence, and frequently far from the well planned intentional strategies scoped out in advance of a project. Implications for application in the context of Yemen include:

- (1) emphasis would be required again on the representation of diversity around the Yemeni decision-making table;
- (2) co-creation and co-evolution of creative responses to problems and key issues would be facilitated through continual conversation and negotiation through a flattened hierarchy of diverse Yemeni representatives; and
- (3) communication and influence would need to be opened up over time in a processual manner to include those who currently feel excluded due to social inequalities – e.g. through gender or social marginalisation and poverty.

Social network theory, social network analysis, and stakeholder mapping all become key in the nature of the system design being advocated here, which essentially might also be thought of as a form of social engineering to leverage potential within certain groups to eradicate social marginalisation, social inequalities and the negative side-effects and impacts of these on humanitarian and economic interest (Webb, 2008a). Where social capital within and between certain groups is already strong, then there is a strong foundation for building relationships and connections between other groups, and also for allowing the digital free flow of communication between them to enable education and free enterprise to flourish. Where social network analysis reveals missing links between certain people or groups, then it is a matter for strategic humanitarian and economic development to seek to fill these gaps in order to make social capital within a system stronger (*ibid.*). Social capital is largely built and improved through trust between people.

As a matter for education, Freire's (1970) work on the "Pedagogy of Oppressed" may also be of value here. In seeking to go to people to transfer knowledge and improve literacy as a key aim of education, Freire advocated for a largely non-hierarchical mode of doing so, where the teacher figure was also a learner, learning from his or her students at the same time, often termed as the promotion of the "liberation of the working classes through a cooperative teacher-student educative model", where the "essence of education" is seen as the "practice of freedom" (Freire, 1970). In this way, education is a knowledge exchange which acknowledges and gives agency to those being "taught", or, in Freire's words, not a "gift" or a "self-achievement", but "a mutual process" where the people engaged in the process of learning are "conscious of their incompleteness, and their attempt to be more fully human" (*ibid.*). Freire's approach seeks to acknowledge yet overcome "conquest, divide and rule, manipulation, and cultural invasion" through "cooperation, unity, organisation, and cultural synthesis" (*ibid.*). His position reinforces a vision whereby "men and women" are perceived to "fight side by side and learn together how to build" their future – "not something given to be received by people", but rather "something to be created by them" (*ibid.*). Freire gives the people the "humanistic and historical task" of the "oppressed" – "to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well" (*ibid.*). This would arguably further strengthen any approach in a fragmented society such as Yemen where the governing

elite exist in an entirely separate world and mode of being than the tribal systems the majority of the population is comprised of.

As a critical pedagogic perspective that emphasises the potential of every individual, Freire gives an idea of what kind of processes could empower those who are disempowered – often through social inequalities (Berglund and Johansson, 2007). Educational strategists and international development agencies are in a unique position to bring to reality this notion of empowerment and to distil this as expected practice as part of a general approach. One process advocated by Freire’s critical pedagogical perspective is “conscientization”, a type of learning that is focussed on perceiving and exposing contradictions as a foundation from which to take action (Berglund and Johansson, 2007) – perhaps, in Yemen’s case, this could be a way to start engaging with tribal peoples in participative dialogue: converse with them about the contradictions between how things are and how they might be in order to create a foundation from which to act together.

Complexity science is clearly and obviously strongly related to Freire’s (1970) work here. Complexity science through the CAS theory and complex processes of relating theory, as articulated above, put the emphasis on diversity and flattened hierarchies. This is resonant with Freire’s own emphasis on the flattening of the hierarchy between teacher and student, and the idea that the teacher also could learn from the student in a mutually co-evolving process of learning – thus diminishing the power relationship between the two. This fulcrum would also be key to structuring a framework for educational intervention co-creation with, within and between the tribal systems. The “power” would have to be relinquished by the so-called governing elite class in order to enable a truly rich and flourishing bottom-up response to emerge from within the tribal system of Yemen. The “conscientization” approach would also include some difficult conversations between tribal players in order to focus on gender inequalities – i.e. the tribal value and customary law which seeks to protect women and girls at once is in contradiction with a set of norms that sees 75 per cent of the population excluded from academic achievement based on gender. These difficult conversations would be ongoing over time, and grounded in history of what is deemed as acceptable abuses and violence against women. It is likely that such contradictions would lead to further conflict and unpredictable outcomes. At the same time, the risk comes with high reward, as articulated by Freire, that “the pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanisation” and that this creates the opportunity for transformation, and the reclaiming of their humanity. The positive spin Freire gives to this is that recognition of oppression is not a “closed world from which there is no exit” but instead just “a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire, 1970).

What this can transform towards is still an unknown, but in the midst of the current global trend towards ever greater technological advancement and an increasingly global digital society, the spread and use of digital technology and tools should also be factored into future humanitarian and economic goals that encompass education and literacy as part of their strategy as part of the goal to ameliorate social inequalities. However, as stated in previous sections above, there is no data available on ICT literacy rates in Yemen currently, which would need assessing and addressing to switch Yemen on to the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the utopian dream it offers. Indeed, it is the vision of the chief proponent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2017) that everyone in all societies can be part of the technologically enhanced future promised, but that, in the meantime, the fourth industrial revolution must be shaped in order to achieve that. Certainly, those in positions of power and influence can help in this shaping process, in order to ensure that social inequalities do not prevent all people from engaging, and that by through such a process, threats from socially marginalised groups of people can be

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reduced and therefore allow more attention to be paid on improving humanitarian, economic and educational goals.

A consideration of how the above thinking can be utilised to good effect in the context of Yemen follows in the next section.

### **Application of complexity science to the Yemeni situation**

In harmony with the preceding discussion, arguably, addressing a system design for education in Yemen requires a large increase in efforts made towards developing the communication channels with tribal peoples, seeking to demarginalise those within them economically and in humanitarian ways through education, literacy and digital integration. While economic and humanitarian objectives can in principal be achieved in part through education, this should not be limited to literacy, numeracy or financial literacy – the affordances also offered through digital integration would exponentialise the potential for innovation and social entrepreneurship as well (Dvir *et al.*, 2006, 2007; Webb, 2018a, b). While high income countries are leading the way in integrating innovation in educational cultures, or through use and implementation of innovation labs (Schwab, 2017), it would be remiss not to lay the basis for such an approach and use of technology to be made available in low to middle income countries such as Yemen.

In seeking to synthesise the complexity science inspired approach articulated above, it is worthwhile reflecting on how Yemeni tribes function. While this paper does not provide an in-depth analysis of the values and functions of Yemeni tribes and customary law, the key issue presented as follows at once leads to recognition of why a bottom-up emergent approach is required:

Tribes are egalitarian, not hierarchical, institutions, and as such do not have a tight command-and-control structure. Tribal leaders, or sheikhs, do not have unconditional authority over their tribes or their members. A sheikh's legitimacy and authority depend on his ability to provide for his constituents [...] tribal self-definition rests on the dual principles of respect for individual autonomy and of community responsibility. (Al-Dawsari, 2018)

This lack of hierarchy and absence of command-control culture coupled with the interaction of highly autonomous individuals lends itself immediately to systems-based approaches underpinned by the assumption of highly distributed organisational processes as made apparent by complexity science principles. Tribal values, which extend to urban areas in Yemen, are based on “customary law” and “preservation of honour” (Al-Dawsari, 2018), which includes “hospitality, nobility, generosity, commitment to one’s word and protection of the ‘weak’ (women, children and subordinate allies)”. Infringements of this customary law can include harming public interest, which also includes destroying schools, which is equated with highest order offences such as murdering innocent people and killing soldiers (Al-Dawsari, 2018). It is therefore evident that schools are, and by extension education is, highly valued. This set of values can be used from which to present individuals with informed choices concerning education: if women and children are to be protected, could it not be argued that education and literacy is one way of strengthening such protection? Could it not be argued that it would be in the interest of the community to educate women and children with equal priority to males? Should therefore not all females remain in education until completion of higher education? If nobility, hospitality and generosity are valued, could it not be argued that greater economic prosperity obtained through greater application of egalitarian principles in the public interest should be given more effort in order to enhance one’s nobility, and to be able to offer greater hospitality and generosity to others? Could it not be the case that more egalitarian engagement with education, literacy and the digital society would enable this to occur more rapidly?

Al-Dawsari (2018) reinforces this idea that “the collective interest of the tribe or community is prioritised over the individual”, and that this “concept of collective responsibility is a foundation of the tribal law”. Negotiating between the individual and the community then would be key, where individual acts can be seen to have consequences for the whole tribe, and where tribes are ultimately held responsible and accountable for member actions. If the values of customary law could be discussed to marry more closely with the aims and potential beneficial impacts of education so that it was seen as part of the collective interest of Yemeni tribes to have all their children attend all levels of education and to more actively discourage teen pregnancy, for example, that might go some way towards alleviating other economic and humanitarian problems that are systemically connected with these fundamental issues. If it was seen more convincingly to be part of the collective tribal interest that no child was out of school, and that all children should complete secondary education and engage in some form of tertiary education, it would no doubt increase even further current literacy rates and provide an alternate future for many Yemenis, a future that could be defined by individual agency as part of the digital society.

If international “aid” projects were therefore brought into line with approaches that could navigate these relationships and values, it might well be possible to create the foundation from which to channel funding into more rigorous mechanisms helping a greater number of Yemenis stay in education until tertiary level, including equal numbers of females, and for this education to be channelled into supporting social entrepreneurship and innovation development opportunities, encouraging more powerful engagement as part of a digital society.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges presented in Yemen that create seemingly intractable problems mean that it would be naïve and culturally imperialistic to assume that any answers or responses would be easily articulated without some hubris. However, this chief limitation notwithstanding, there is a humanitarian imperative requiring all efforts be made to address the social inequalities that are systemically connected across the globe. Yemen is indeed part of our connected human family and the global ecosystem. This paper merely sets out a review of the current situation and the potential complexity science offers to perhaps ameliorate this and also provide direction for future aid and international development.

Revisiting key issues already presented in this paper are perhaps worthwhile in conclusion. The humanitarian argument and imperative exists that requires an alternative to airstrikes and conflict resulting in the loss of thousands of human lives. This topic demands attention at the highest global levels, but is seemingly one that few politicians are willing to speak out over, and requires an alternative approach couched in terms of social and humanitarian justice; such an alternative approach could be found through a combination of responses to social, economic and other needs at the grassroots level.

The UN classification of Yemen as an LDC due to low gross national income, “weak human assets”, and high economic vulnerability and impoverishment does not accord the country dignity. And yet, the economic matter seems of relevance as youth affiliation to AQAP seems to be blamed on economic and educational marginalisation. In the meantime, perhaps the economic distress the country seems to be labelled with might not be so profound if certain global actors were to halt conflict. The problem might not be that “Yemen is poor”, but that instead other countries are hammering Yemen beyond reason and need to stop. If the argument is that AQAP poses a threat, then seek out ways to stop membership recruitment: it is a key argument of this paper that education is a key way to address this, offering a range of possible alternative outcomes. If Iran is backing Houthi rebels and stirring up contention, then a range of other conversations might be had. The perceived vulnerability of Yemen and its “weak human assets” can also be re-framed to accord dignity and power to the strength of Yemen’s tribal system.

The role of adult and female literacy, female engagement in education, primary mathematics achievement levels and adult financial literacy might also all be reframed. While pointing out weaknesses in these respects, we might be blinded to the strong social capital that exists within the tribal system instead, which could in turn, as suggested, be used as the fulcrum from which to confront and turn around any problems which identify local need. Although contrasted with gender inequalities and abuses, it has to be acknowledged that the female role within Yemeni society is a fundamentally important one – perhaps therein lies a solution. We might dare to dream about who the future empowered educators of Yemen will be. Will they arise from within the strong social capital of a Yemeni tribe? Home educated as lifelong learners perhaps by some of the 89 per cent literate members of Yemeni society or connecting into the digital society?

Will displaced persons in Yemen be given the same chances as Syrian refugees in Jordan? Finding opportunities in innovation incubators to develop their own thriving businesses?

Issues of basic sanitation are important, and could well be linked to cholera risk, but these matters might also be addressed if conflict stopped – something which is being induced from the global level, not from within the country.

The six principles of complexity science identified (diversity, history and time, the edge of chaos, self-organisation and emergence, unpredictability and pattern recognition) provide a useful starting point from which to reframe current perspectives on Yemen, allowing us to see the autonomously interacting families of the tribal system as a strong asset to the country and creative entities capable of shaping change and innovation. The flattening lens of diversity would facilitate recognition and engagement of Yemeni representation around tables of participative dialogue, enabling in turn the Yemeni people to enter their own historical process as responsible subjects with consciousness, to self-affirm, as Freire would argue, giving agency as a practice of freedom in empowering mutual processes. From this, it may be possible for locally defined educational interventions to be co-created, and to potentially overcome the risks of the fourth Industrial Revolution.

For further research, therefore, it would be valuable for Yemeni narrative accounts to be heard, as voices exploring, describing and explaining their own visions for the future: how do they imagine using new technology? How is this already emerging bottom-up? What do they define as their problems and potential solutions? What role might home education play in confronting apparent deficits in literacy among adults and female members of the population? Should teenage mothers be dissuaded or technologically empowered to thrive?

In line with the above, and by way of a summary of key topics covered in this paper, it is appropriate to make some recommendations for intervention and practice.

## Recommendations

As part of a final set of recommendations in this paper, and drawing together the discussion so far, the following is suggested:

- (1) call for a review of international aid and development funding being channelled into Yemen;
- (2) utilise a complexity science approach to understand and design interventions in a bottom-up emergent manner around locally defined need;
- (3) put the focus of these efforts on engagement with tribal peoples: where tribes are seen as collective entities comprised of egalitarian and autonomous individual members;
- (4) co-develop educational development strategies grounded in tribal values relating to customary law to maximise potential impact;

- (5) engage tribal Yemeni champions of campaigns such as “all children should be in school and finish school”, and to lead projects for improved sanitation at places of education;
- (6) call for a review and improvement of international scholarship programmes offered to Yemeni people, as well as preparedness schemes to encourage the chances of potential applicants being successful; and
- (7) call for a review of the ways and the means to integrate more Yemenis in the wider digital society and seek to engage meaningfully with them in participative dialogue and in social entrepreneurship and innovation to enhance economic development opportunities.

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# School block grants as a model of financial decentralization in Iraq

School block grants

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to assess the channels of education financing as they exist currently in Iraq. It argues that the current model of financing is highly centralized and in order to encourage a school-based management and better school outcomes, there needs to be decentralization of financing. The paper considers block grants as a mechanism for decentralization and explores other country experiences in this area.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper opts for both an analytical and exploratory study of the financing channels in the education sector in Iraq based on both primary field-based surveys and secondary sources of information such as World Bank and UN documents. For understanding other country experience of school block grant provision, the paper reviews literature and attempts to find learnings for Iraq.

**Findings** – The paper provides a detailed insight into the service delivery modal and channels of education financing in Iraq across multiple tiers. It argues that the centralized model of education financing is one of the factors that contribute to weak school governance and school performance indicators. It explores the idea of school block grants as a model of decentralized financing and a review of other country experiences on provision of school block grants gives some interesting insights into what might work for Iraq.

**Research limitations/implications** – Economic wars, sanctions and conflict have severely affected the country and as a consequence there are very limited data and information available and this has impacted the study. Furthermore, though the country has been liberated from ISIS, the peace is fragile and any research findings have to be seen in this background.

**Practical implications** – The paper does not stop at identifying the problem, i.e. centralization of financing but attempts to explore and provide a way to get around this in the form of provision of school block grants.

**Originality/value** – There are very few studies that explore the service delivery model and financing channels in the education sector in Iraq and therefore this paper should add value to any discussion on post-conflict reconstruction.

**Keywords** Decentralization, Channels of school financing, Iraq education sector, School-based management, School block grants

**Paper type** General review

Economic sanctions, wars and internal conflict have severely affected Iraq over the last few decades. Even though with the liberation of the country from the Islamic State, there seems to be a somewhat fragile return to peace and stability, and the economy and social sectors seem to be in varying states of disarray. Iraq, whose education system was once considered to be one of the most advanced in the Middle East with near-universal primary enrollment rates until the 1980s, is plagued today by low primary and secondary enrollment rates, low attendance, outdated curriculum content, deteriorating learning outcomes and severe shortage of school-related infrastructure (Mosler *et al.*, 2015).

School performance indicators as evidenced from data provided in the National Development Plan (NDP) 2010–2014 and the NDP 2013–2017 reveal the shortcomings of education service provision in Iraq. The NDP 2010–2014 indicates that 35.8 percent of educational facilities at the elementary level and 42.1 percent at the secondary level are used to provide two teaching shifts, while 4.5 percent of facilities at the elementary level and 3.4 percent at the secondary level are used for three shifts (NDP 2010–2014). The NDP 2013–2017 highlights the need to improve the learning environment in schools and address the shortage of computers, class desks, reading desks and teaching aids. The Plan document



highlights that to achieve current and targeted student enrollment rate targets at the minimum over the next four years, over 7,000 new facilities need to be built at the primary and kindergarten level and 2,250 facilities at the secondary level (NDP 2013–2017).

While conflict, insecurity and damage to resources could be one of the primary reasons why school performance has deteriorated (Diwakar, 2015), an equally important factor has been the highly centralized system of school financing in the country that does not allow schools to utilize funds in the manner that is best suited for them. A large proportion of the education budget for schools is currently allocated for wages and pensions of staff, and while the capital budget is significant, actual rates of expenditure are very low. Getting access to the capital and operation and management allocations is a tedious and resource-consuming process for schools, which often leads to under-utilization of these resources, negatively impacting education and the quality of the learning environment (UNICEF, 2016). While there are many ways in which this can be addressed, decentralization of school financing through establishing school block grants might have the potential to improve the utilization of funds leading to better targeted outcomes and consequentially raising school performance (Kedir Kelil *et al.*, 2014). This is the idea that this paper attempts to explore.

### **Review of literature and methodology**

Education financing in Iraq at the school level is a subject that has been very less explored. Most of the studies on the education sector in Iraq focus mostly on either providing an overview of the education system development (Issa and Jamil, 2010) or on understanding the impact of conflict on education outcomes in the country (Diwakar, 2015; Agustin Velloso de Santisteban, 2005). Issa and Jamil (2010) for instance trace the development of the education sector in Iraq from the establishment of the Republic of Iraq in 1958 to the present and argue that Iraq had an illustrious history in the education sector but the sector began to deteriorate from 1990 onwards with the gulf war initiating the political turmoil in the country. Diwakar (2015) with a similar focus on the impact of conflict on education examines to what extent armed conflict affects education accumulation and enrollment rates in Iraqi schools, and whether this effect differs by gender. The findings suggest that an increase in conflict is associated with a decrease in education for both genders, though more pronounced for boys. A study by Agustin Velloso de Santisteban (2005) also explores the impact of conflict (since 1990) and sanctions (since 2003) imposed on Iraq and finds that these factors have reversed the previous educational achievements and rendered the Iraqi education system unable to fulfill its stated missions.

As these studies indicate, conflict and the associated policy decisions both national and international is a factor that has had significant impact on education outcomes and performance. But as the country enters a possibly fragile but nevertheless politically stable phase, it is important to explore other factors that could have an impact on education delivery and governance. Financing and financing arrangements is an important aspect to be explored in this context as many studies on other parts of the world find that decentralization of school financing and consequential school-based management can have significant improvements in efficiency, accountability and responsiveness of schools leading to better educational attainments (e.g. Maslowski *et al.*, 2007; Astiz *et al.*, 2002).

This is the gap that this paper aims to cover. This paper attempts to outline the education service delivery model in Iraq and the various channels of school financing and emphasize the centralized nature of the financing model and the associated limitations. The paper goes on to propose the provision of school block grants as a possible alternate channel of financing that has had some extent of success in other countries as evidenced from the country studies reviewed toward the end.

Given the nature of the political and security conflict that the country has been experiencing, the methodology is a mix of consultations and secondary research.

The decision to follow a qualitative approach was based on the lack of availability of data on school funding at a micro level. Much of the background information on the service delivery model in Iraq is informed by the author's participation in a consultative study on developing school-based management systems and child-friendly schools in Iraq[1] and is based on informal discussions and conversations with stakeholders across the spectrum – from policy makers to teachers. The conclusions are also informed by comparative examples of block grant provision within the education sector from other developing economies (both fragile and transitional) and by the literature on education and decentralization.

The focus of this study is solely public schools. Private schools comprise a very small percentage of primary and secondary schools in Iraq, roughly around 3.5 percent and while the quality of education is good, they can be affordable only to those who are willing to pay really high fees (Al-Shaikhly and Cui, 2017) and hence the outreach is very limited.

This review paper therefore begins by outlining the education service delivery model in Iraq and the different channels of school financing as it currently exists in Iraq, the associated concerns with this model of financing and the need to improve financing channels. The paper then proposes block grants as an option that the government could consider for decentralization of financing and attempts to explore other country experience in the provision of block grants in the education sector and finally tries to conclude with a few suggestions on a way ahead for the provision of block grants in Iraq.

### **The education service delivery model in Iraq**

The education service delivery model in Iraq is divided across federal, regional (Kurdistan Region of Iraq), governorate and district/sub-district levels each of which has a mandated role in general education service delivery (UNESCO, 2003). The Federal Government is divided into 18 governorates each of which is subdivided into districts and sub-districts (Shakir, 2017). The Kurdistan Regional Government has a jurisdiction over three governorates, meaning that the Federal Government has direct responsibility for education in the remaining 15 governorates[2].

Historically, Iraq's Government was a highly centralized unitary system, and though since 2003 a process of decentralization has been adopted, many of the old rules and regulation supporting centralization remain in place. The education sector and school financing channels reflect this governance context. Within the service delivery model for preschool, primary and secondary education, three ministries play a key role in funding and executing the education budget – the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the Ministry of Planning (MoP) (Issa and Jamil, 2010). Since the 2008 Provincial Powers Act and 2009 Provincial Elections, elected Provincial Councils also play a role in the formulation of provincial development plans and in shaping delivery of education services (Cravens and Brinkerhoff, 2013). The education system in Iraq (excluding Kurdistan) consists of two-year kindergarten stage, six-year primary and compulsory stage and six-year secondary stage with two levels: a three-year lower secondary level and a three-year upper secondary level (UNICEF, 2016).

### **Current channels of school financing in Iraq**

The current system of financing schools is far from efficient and effective, and in all cases schools lack discretion over resources making it difficult for schools to have decisive powers. The existence of multiple channels of financing – leading to fragmentation of resource management with very limited flow of information between channels and between key institutions/departments involved – results in weak coordination and inefficient resource mobilization.

Currently in Iraq, funds for education are officially disbursed from one tier of management to the next mainly through four main channels. Though the MoE is the key ministry responsible for the management of preschool, primary and secondary education,

the MoF and the MoP are also involved in the financing modalities for school-related expenses, as are Provincial Councils who have oversight of Federal block grants.

The MoE includes the Minister's Office, the Offices of the Under-Secretaries, the Legislative Division and 18 general directorates of education and institutes. In addition, the MoE has 21 directorates of education in the central ministry, as well as one in each governorate, except for Baghdad, which has four directorates. These directorates serve as provincial offices and are chaired by a director general responsible for the implementation of education in the governorate. The directorates have technical and administrative departments similar to departments of the central ministry. The departments are responsible for: the implementation and follow-up of educational policies and educational plans; the recruitment and human resources management of teaching staff; the supervision of schools; and the preparation of necessary school buildings, amongst other responsibilities.

Each governorate is further subdivided into districts with their own responsible officer. Head teachers and assistant head teachers administer schools. There are also Parent Teachers Associations (PTAs) and other community-led groups, but their involvement is very limited and often in a non-organized manner. There is, in fact, little evidence of PTAs active participation in decision making.

In many advanced educational systems, school resourcing is unified through school grants and schools are actively encouraged to raise revenues directly, within a framework developed and set by the government. The current fragmented financing arrangement in Iraq reflects a country in transition between a highly centralized unitary system and one that is slowly devolving. It also reflects the rather fragmented approach to public finance management. Currently, an economic classification of school financing can be divided into the following four different channels: wages; operation and management (O&M) expenses; capital investment finances; and school-generated revenue. These categories of financing reach the school through four different channels as discussed below.

The first channel of financing is essentially wages and salaries that are paid to school staff. Wages and salaries are the largest component of school-related expenses. The channel of financing wages and salaries is in line with the 2004 Financial Management Law. Once the budget law is passed by the Council of Representatives, the MoF transfers salary allocations to the MoE on a quarterly basis. If, however, the budget law is not passed, then finances are transferred on a monthly basis based on a pro-rata system.

The MoE then distributes quarterly transfers covering salaries to the governorate-level directorates of education, who in turn allocate finances to districts, where the head teacher of each school collects and disburses wages and salaries, based on submission of signed time sheets. Each head teacher must visit the district accounts department and collect a cheque for the total aggregate salary amount, before presenting the check for payment, then carrying cash to school to make cash payments by hand to each salaried employee. Signed payrolls indicating receipt of salaries are then deposited at the District Head of Accounting department and these are then accounted for by the governorate director general before being reported to the center, who in turn then reports to the MoF.

The second channel is a needs-based financing of O&M expenses associated with running schools, and it is not based on a particular standard, which in the case for education depends on many factors. As with Channel 1, the MoF allocates funds to the MoE. However, unlike wages and salaries, O&M allocations are request driven by the schools. The head teacher submits to the district office a request for expenses to be incurred, including for fixing broken desks, windows and other facilities. The district office then directs the request to the appropriate department within the MoE who in turn approves the expenditure and allocates it to the district.

The problem with this process is twofold. First, there is a time lag in approvals and provision of funds. Second, given the travel cost associated with submitting a request to the

district, which at times exceeds the amount of the required O&M amount, head teachers may be inclined to wait for enough needs to arise to meet a certain minimum expense threshold before approaching the district accounting department. Both of these aspects affect the smooth functioning of the school.

The third channel is the financing of capital expenses, which involves the MoF, MoE and the MoP. Capital spending covers major renovation of existing buildings, new schools and larger purchases such as vehicles. Currently, MoE is only involved in the planning of capital budgeting with the MoP channeling funds, which are authorized by the Provincial Councils.

The MoE contract department provides unified performance reports to the MoF, which includes information on the use of funds for capital investment projects, though as the budget process is fragmented across different ministries, the majority of under-spending in the education sector relates to the capital budget. To secure allocations and to meet oversight-reporting requirements, MoE also reports to MoP using prescribed forms on all approved projects in their investment budget. MoP requires economic and technical feasibility reports of all projects and copies of correspondences related to project execution.

Project reports are provided at the beginning of the year after the budget has been passed, and determine the initial cash and allocation requirements. In-year investment budget releases are secured when MoP writes to the MoF informing it of their approval of satisfactory project progress. MoP's memorandum also prescribes the amount needed for release in accordance with the arrangements with the MoE. After the approval of the project budget, the confirmation of sufficient amount of unallocated funds in the MoE capital budget, and the reconciliation with any unified reports received, MoF issues the cash transfer to the MoE. The MoE then contracts out the investment work through a process of open tenders and bids to the private sector. Provincial councils also play a significant role in the determination of budget allocations across all channels.

The fourth and final channel is finance obtained by schools through their own revenue-generating activities, though these are limited to revenue from renting out premises for the school canteen. The larger the school the greater the revenue, though revenues from school canteens remain very minor. The revenue generated through this activity is what allows most schools to meet their smaller day-to-day operational and management expenses that are too tedious to be sanctioned through Channel 2 financing. School canteen revenue was initiated during the conflict to increase school-level resource availability.

Currently there is no significant PTA or other community-level financing and schools are not permitted to raise revenues directly, though this must change. In addition, support to education from donors provides only a minor contribution when compared to the country's own resources spent.

### **Concerns with the current system of financing**

The current system of school financing as outlined above is far from efficient and effective, and there are many concerns associated with it. The existence of multiple channels of financing leads to fragmentation of resource management and undermine the ability of head teachers to lead school governance and deliver quality education. The limited flow of information between the key institutions and departments in each channel and across channels leads to weak coordination and inefficient resource mobilization. The current system also leads to prioritization of mandatory expenses such as salaries, with operation and capital investment expenses not receiving sufficient attention. This, despite a huge deficit in school building numbers and multiple shifts, has been discussed earlier. These expenses play an equally significant role as that of teaching in improving the learning experience of students and have an important role in determining the net enrollment rates of students in schools.

Transactional costs incurred by schools in the process of trying to obtain financial resources are also high. The current system of financing is a top-down approach where the ministries of finance, education and planning decide priorities for expenditure on behalf of schools, thereby, not taking into account the particular needs of each school.

### **Need for improved channels of financing**

The challenges outlined above indicate the need to consolidate the various channels of financing in such a manner that schools play a more active role in managing resources at the level of the school, in particular in relation to day-to-day management. The need for decentralization of finances is underlined by the fact that despite the government's commitment to increase sector funding, school governance remains weak and school performance assessment indicators reveal shortcomings. Improving governance through consolidated payments as school block grants would provide a considerable opportunity for improving education outcomes and motivating the work force, while also increasing accountability.

Sector budget allocation on education has increased in 2014–2017 by 5 percent from the previous NDP (2010–2014). This indicates the commitment on the part of the government to increase funding to the sector to improve access and quality. However, the actual budget execution rate in the education sector (estimated at 57 percent in 2013) is much lower as compared to the execution rate in other sectors such as industry (94 percent), transport and communication (81 percent) and agriculture (71 percent), though this seems to be largely caused by failures in spending the capital budget (NDP, 2014–2017). Centralization and the delays and difficulty associated with schools gaining access to funds might be a factor that leads to a lack of utilization of allocated resources.

The NDP 2014–2017 outlines that there have been improvements in the overall net enrollment rate of students over the period 2010–2014 but these do not be significant enough to indicate a structural improvement in the system as a whole. For instance, the net enrollment rate remains at only 40 percent for middle schools and at 27 percent for preparatory schools (NDP 2014–2017). Furthermore, the report also indicates that there are significant differences in net enrollment rates across gender and across provinces, indicating that some schools seem to be doing better than others.

Furthermore, the NDP 2014–2017 outlines the severe shortage of school buildings as one of the pressing issues to be tackled in this sector. This shortage of more than 7,000 schools leads to overcrowding of classrooms and doubling and tripling of shifts, which in turn affects the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching. With the central ministries and provincial-level governorates responsible for capital expenditure planning, there seems to be a gap between planned school infrastructure development and actual needs.

### **The need for decentralization – are block grants an option to be considered?**

The factors outlined above indicate that decentralization of funding to schools could lead to better outcomes. Decentralization could be done by transferring certain grant management responsibilities to schools (this could be school governing councils, head teachers or PTAs).

While there might be different channels through which this can be done, one of the mechanisms through which decentralization of school financing can be done is through the provision of block grants. School block grants are allocation of funds to schools, the value of which is based on a set of pre-determined criteria. School block grants could be either earmarked (that can only be used for specific lines of expenditure) or non-earmarked (that allow the recipient schools to decide which lines of expenditure they want to prioritize). This provides schools with resources (on a per student basis) to be used for non-wage expenditures on the items that matter most to a particular school. In the case of Iraq it could

also give governorates, districts and schools greater administrative control so they can improve educational administration and schooling quality.

Moving from a centralized ministry-driven and top-down approach to a decentralized and school-driven process of financing could yield multiple benefits:

- higher efficiency by improving transparency of disbursement of funds;
- improved equitable distribution across schools by ensuring that all schools receive the same amount of funds or that those schools that are more disadvantaged (in poor or rural communities) receive more funds to put them on a level playing field with others;
- higher level of flexibility for schools to prioritize expenditure based on individual school needs; and
- increased sense of ownership and commitment from the part of schools by involving them in the process of decision making.

A review of the literature on the experience of financial decentralization through block grants in various developing countries as outlined below indicate that there is some evidence on positive outcomes of increasing school enrollment rates and other school performance indicators, including efficiency and improved transparency when school block grants are provided.

## Other country experiences and learning

### *Indonesia*

School block grants were introduced in Indonesia in 1998 under the Scholarships and Grants Program (Deffous, 2011). Under this program 60 percent of schools in the country were provided grants to anticipate and counter the consequences in the education sector of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. As an immediate response to the crisis, the gross enrollment rates in the country fell from 62 to 52 percent between 1988 and 1992 at the junior secondary level. This program was therefore meant to maintain enrollments in a context of financial and economic crisis. However, a second phase of the program called the School Improvement Grants Program (SIGP) was introduced in 2001 in 133 districts in poor schools dealing with internally displaced students (IDS) and schools affected by catastrophes. SIGP was thus specifically concerned with poverty reduction.

The first phase of the SGP was designed to maintain enrollment and the quality of education in the context of a financial and economic crisis. The formula was based on the enrollment of IDS as it was meant to assist schools meeting the needs of these IDS. The second phase of the program (SIGP) had objectives that were specifically concerned with poverty alleviation as it specifically targeted the neediest schools in the poorest districts (133 districts out of 300). The formula for deciding grant amounts was basic and it simply took into account the total student enrollment. The grant delivery was directly to schools through either banks or through local post offices.

### *Impact of the program*

The grant program was structured with the objective to retain students than to increase enrollment rates and in that it seemed to have succeeded with dropout rates not increasing but the program did not seem to have any impact on increasing enrollment rates. But there seemed to have been an improvement in school-related infrastructure as a result of the grants.

### *Sri Lanka*

Under the Educational Quality Inputs (EQI) Scheme (Deffous, 2011) introduced in the year 2000, block grants were provided to Sri Lankan schools to fund education quality inputs,

which were defined as all materials, equipment, instruments and services used to add to the quality of education. This covered most non-wage-related expenses such as consumable goods and capital maintenance. Funds allocated to schools on the basis of Norm-Based Unit Cost Resource Allocation Mechanism based on the following factors: quality input norms produced by educationists; student populations; corrections for possible economies and diseconomies of scale; availability of different grade-cycles in schools; and allocation of funds for gradual capital improvements on a needs basis. Of the recurrent EQI budget, 60 percent was to be allocated for consumables while 40 percent for repair and maintenance.

#### *Impact of the program*

Under EQI, similar schools were treated equally and student characteristics, school cycles and school site differences were taken into account when allocating funds. The results indicate that smaller schools, rural schools and more disadvantaged schools received and spent a higher per capita allocation per student. However, around 20 percent of these funds were left unspent. A criticism of the allocation process was the complicated formula on the basis of which block grants were calculated.

#### *Qatar*

Starting from the year 2003 a new system of independent schools (Brewer *et al.*, 2006) was introduced in Qatar, with the central government providing funding to schools but providing autonomy to schools to manage themselves. The independent school model represented a move to a more decentralized system of schooling than had existed previously in Qatar. The basic aim of the reform was to widen the range of options available to parents, to reduce significantly the extent of control over schools by central governments, to increase the monitoring and evaluation of students, administrators and teachers and to hold schools accountable for quality.

#### *Impact of the program*

The results have been encouraging and there are plans to rollout this system on a wider scale.

#### *Macedonia*

Under the Fiscal Decentralization of Education Financing Scheme, 2005, a process of decentralization was carried out in two phases in which municipalities gained greater control over education-related financing (Nikolov, 2004). During the first phase, municipalities were made responsible for maintenance of transferred facilities but salaries were still being paid by the central government. During the second phase, municipalities were entrusted with the payment of staff salaries as well. The financial flows to support the decentralized sectors in the two phases of decentralization were through the provision of categorical grants and block grants.

Categorical grants provided the municipalities the freedom to efficiently and effectively manage the material assets of each sector effectively providing municipalities the right to decide how material assets were used and to decide on basic maintenance. The second phase of provision of block grants provided municipalities the right to decide on expenditure related to all aspects including wages and salaries. Block grants consequently were at least six times larger than categorical grants. Formula for allocation was the simple formula of per student grant.

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*Impact of the program*

While there were improvements in school outcomes, this was not equal across municipalities. Furthermore, even though there were two phases of decentralization there was not an appropriate amount of increase in managerial powers of the decentralized authorities reflecting the reluctance to let go of powers at centralized levels.

*Uganda*

Under the Universal Primary Education Drive, block grants were provided to schools which could be utilized for most administrative activities apart from paying teacher salaries and wages (Hubbard, 2007). The grants were centrally determined and calculated but released as conditional block grants to districts which released funds to schools on basis of enrollment. The ministry also released guidelines to schools for allocation of funds specifying the percentage breakdown, for instance, 50 percent for scholastic materials, 5 percent for administration and so on. There also was an effort at transparency by posting publicly the amounts received from the district office in the school.

*Results*

The Ugandan experience has won significant international praise. Decentralization had various positive developments: increased participation, increased transparency and accountability and improvements in capacity building. Nevertheless, the central government transfers still are insufficient, and the local governments are neither involved, nor consulted on the national budget.

**Lessons for Iraq from the country experiences**

The country experiences reviewed above have various implications for any potential drafting of school block grants in Iraq. The Indonesian case study (Deffous, 2011), for example, indicates the success of having a simple formula as against the Sri Lankan experience of complexly calculated block grant distribution models. Grant distribution on the basis of student enrollment rates seems to be the more preferred arrangement perhaps due to the simplicity to execute the program. The Indonesian experience indicates that while school enrollment rates did not increase as a result of school block grants, there was an increased expenditure on school infrastructure. This has positive implications for Iraq considering the infrastructure shortages the country faces as outlined earlier in the paper. As evidenced in the experience of Sri Lanka block grants supporting non-wage expenditure might have more positive outcomes. This country example also highlights the importance of structuring grants in such a manner that non-utilization of funding would not be an issue. While the Qatar experience (Brewer *et al.*, 2006) does not have significant findings relevant for Iraq given the differential context, it is interesting to consider given that it is one of the few examples of successful implementation of school block grants in the wider Middle Eastern region. Lessons for Iraq from the Macedonian experience (Nikolov, 2004) are the two-step decentralization process where block grants initially focused on operational and later on wage related expenditure as well. Yet another important lesson is the fact that legal decentralizing alone would not lead to real decentralization unless mindsets are changed and actual power is transferred to the decentralized authorities and schools. The lesson for Iraq from the Ugandan experience (Hubbard, 2007) and the difficulties the system faced could be to engage school-level management and local governments in the larger process of national budget determination for education.

## Conclusion

Given the background of the various shortcomings faced by the Iraqi education system, this paper attempts to look at current models of service delivery and financing in the sector and tries to argue that decentralization and better utilization of financing by schools through the provision of block grants could be an idea to be explored in the context of Iraq. The paper recognizes that school block grant provision experiences across countries have led to mixed outcomes. Nevertheless, given the current context it does seem an idea worth exploring though much deeper research needs to be carried out. This paper therefore is intended to trigger the discussion on decentralization of education funding to schools in Iraq and clearly recognizes that much more research is needed before any clear conceptual models can be built to develop policy on.

## Notes

1. Much of the information on school financing channels are based on the author's informal consultations as part of a study that the author did for a Geopolicity Inc project on "School based management and child friendly schools in Iraq." None of the information is confidential.
2. This paper does not consider the education system in Kurdistan.

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# Conflict, insecurity and the political economies of higher education

## The case of Syria post-2011

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper stems from a 12-month collaborative enquiry between a group of Syrian academics in exile in Turkey and academics from the University of Cambridge into the state of Syrian Higher Education after the onset of the conflict in 2011. The purpose of this paper is to draw on 19 open-ended interviews with exiled Syrian academics; two focus groups; mapping and timeline exercises; and 117 interviews collected remotely by collaborating Syrian academics with former colleagues and students who were still living inside Syria at the time of data collection. The findings of the research suggest that Syrian HE after 2011 was fragmented across regions; in some cases non-existent, and in others deemed to be in a state of reform in order to meet student needs. Key issues that emerged from this work are human rights' abuses directed against academics and students including the detainment, purging and kidnapping of academics, an increased militarisation of university life and a substantive loss of academic and human capital.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The overall design involved two workshops held in Turkey (in June and July, 2017) at which the Cambridge team explained the stages of undertaking qualitative research and planned the collaborative enquiry with Syrian co-researchers. The first workshop addressed the nature of qualitative research and explored the proposed methods of interviewing, using timelines and mapping. The instruments for interviewing were constructed in groups together and mapping was undertaken with the 21 Syrian academics in exile who attended the workshop. Syrian academics also built their own research plans as a way of expanding the consultation dimension of this project inside Syria, engaged in survey and interview protocol planning and discussed ways to access needed documentation which could be drawn upon to enrich the project. The Syrian co-researchers interviewed remotely HE staff and students who had remained in, or recently left, Syria; the key criterion for group or participant selection was that they had recent and relevant experience of Syrian HE. The second workshop focused on data analysis and writing up. There was also wide consultation with participants inside and outside Syria. As part of the research, the Cambridge team conducted open-ended interviews with 19 Syrian academics and students living in exile in Turkey. This involved interviewing Syrian scholars about their experiences of HE, policy changes over time and their experiences of displacement. The researchers developed this protocol prior to the capacity-building workshops based on previous research experience on academic and student displacement, alongside extensive preparation on the conditions of Syrian HE, conflict and displacement. In addition to interviewing, a pivotal element of methodological rigour was that the authors sought to member check what participants were learning through mapping and timeline exercises and extensive note-taking throughout both workshops. The major issues that the authors confronted were ethical concerns around confidentiality, the need to ensure rigorously the protection of all participants' anonymity and to be extremely mindful of the political sensitivity of issues when interviewing participants who may not feel able to fully trust "outsider" researchers. Issues of social trust have been reported in the literature as one of the most significant drawbacks in conducting research in "conflict environments" (see Cohen and Arieli, 2011) where academics and students have been working and/or studying in autocratic regimes or were operating within political contexts where being open or critical of any form of institutional life such as university work or the nation could cost them their jobs or their lives.

**Findings** – The accounts of Syrian academics and students emerging from this work point to some of the state-building expressions of HE manifested in the shaping of professional and personal experiences, the condition and status of HE, its spatial arrangements and their associated power formations, and resulting in



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feelings of intense personal and professional insecurity among Syrian scholars and students since 2011. While acknowledging that the Syrian situation is deemed one of the worst humanitarian crises in the region in recent decades, these accounts resonate, if in different ways, with other studies of academics and students who have experienced highly centralised and autocratic states and tightly regulated HE governance regimes (Barakat and Milton, 2015; Mazawi, 2011).

**Originality/value** – Currently, there is virtually no research on the status and conditions of higher education in Syria as a consequence of the war, which commenced in 2011. This work presents a first-person perspective from Syrian academics and students on the state of HE since the onset of the conflict. The major contribution of this work is the identification of key factors shaping conflict and division in HE, alongside the political economies of HE destruction which are unique to the Syrian war and longstanding forms of authoritarian state governance.

**Keywords** Higher education, Political economy, Conflict, Displacement

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The continuing Syrian conflict constitutes a devastating humanitarian crisis that has profoundly impacted higher education both within the country and beyond its borders. (Wattenpaugh *et al.*, 2014). The most recent reports on the resuscitation and future development of higher education in Syria point to an extremely long, difficult and unpredictable recovery (see Al-Fanar reporting, 2018). Moreover, the chances of yet further decline are real, with students and academics continuing to be displaced, de-credentialised and suffering vast personal and professional losses (see Dillabough *et al.*, 2018a, b). In these circumstances it is very difficult to map the conditions of Syrian higher education with empirical precision. This challenge notwithstanding, in this paper we have sought to chart some of the post-2011 trends impacting upon Syrian HE in a time of war and dislocation. We have approached this task principally by way of first-hand “insider” accounts from Syrian academics and students as they reflect on the changing nature of HE in their country. First-hand accounts of this sort are significant for three reasons: in the first place, researchers both inside Syria and beyond its borders have been largely unable to ascertain robust information regarding the state and conditions of HE since the onset of the war, yet such information is urgently needed to support those HE actors impacted by the conflict both inside Syria and those in exile: second, for many Syrian academics – if displaced – it is often difficult to express their concerns about HE in conflict due to a fear of reprisals from their own government; and third, those continuing to live or work inside Syria are also under threat by government and security forces, making it difficult to share information about the conflict, humanitarian crises or HE corruption, contingent upon the war. To put this differently, the prevailing authoritarian patrimony in Syria means that research participants take considerable risks in sharing their concerns about any institution impacted by the war and its complex consequences. Through our work with a charity supporting academics in exile<sup>[1]</sup>, we have been able to assess and explore first-person accounts of life and experience in HE from the midst of the Syrian conflict.

More particularly, we examine Syrian higher education not only as a site of “heightened politicisation” since the start of the conflict (Wattenpaugh *et al.*, 2014), but also as an institutional sector that remains highly conflicted about its public role and mission. Importantly, it is also a sector potentially facing intense transformation, including the prospect of complete decimation in some regions of the country, ongoing fragmentation, corruption and dysfunction, and in some cases, the potential for the emergence of new HE institutions. In light of such a complex and conflicted HE landscape, it is evident that Syrian HE presents a critically urgent site for sustained examination, though it is important also to note that very little robust research into the state of the sector was available in the pre-conflict period (see Barakat and Milton, 2016; Dillabough *et al.*, 2018a).

Against this background, the aims of this paper are to review the main political, social and economic trends impacting upon HE in Syria from the start of the 2011 conflict. The substantive questions we ask are: In what ways has the conflict impacted on the HE

sector and impeded its ability to function as a robust sector of learning in Syria since 2011? How has the political governance of HE impacted the Syrian HE sector in general as well as the professional and personal lives of HE actors, whether inside the country or in exile? How has the conflict changed the ways in which HE is understood by Syrian scholars and students both within and beyond Syria's borders? What are the implications for the future of HE in Syria in terms of its "development" as a sector with the possibilities of achieving functional educational and social mobility for both scholars and students?

The paper is organised as follows: first, we provide an overview of the exploratory theoretical orientations we have adopted to assess the state and conditions of Syrian HE. Second, we describe our methodology. Third, we examine the key themes emerging from the literature concerned with post-2011 Syrian HE and provide evidence to support these themes from our own data, particularly first-hand accounts from displaced Syrian academics and students. We conclude with a discussion of HE activity in conflict settings and most particularly in the Syrian case.

### **Exploratory theoretical directions**

With few exceptions (see Millican, 2017), HE in conflict is a heavily undertheorised area of study, particularly when conceived as a social institution of the state, a political instrument of state power and as part of the cultural fabric of social life. Consequently, very little theoretical work, particularly within conflict zones, has explored how HE can or may be used as a way of shoring up political power during war and conflict. Moreover, few theories of HE have addressed the concept of militarisation, war economies and security as central mechanisms for understanding the organisation of HE during war. This is significant because one major instrument of a central state governance structure oriented towards autocratic practices is to instil and elevate public anxieties within the polity in pursuit of corrupt objectives rather than the cultivation of a public good (see Mazawi, 2011). In this respect the words of Hannah Arendt (1979) remain timely:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule [in conflict] are people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists (p. 54).

Arendt's words help us to understand how in the context of conflict and war and an associated political and economic struggle for power, the organisation and governance of higher education is rendered desperately vulnerable.

Syria's political history as it relates to HE governance is one which is characterised by turbulence, upheaval, market transformation, limited reforms and high levels of militarisation, with a longstanding security apparatus presence in HE (see Buckner, 2011; Dillabough *et al.*, 2018a, b). It is therefore closely tied to the history of the security apparatus, a patrimonial military loyal to the state and a highly centralised form of state governance. Syria operates through an authoritarian state structure historically grounded in religious and ethnic conflict and through a security apparatus which is driven less by national interests and more by loyalty to the state leadership (see Barakat and Milton, 2015).

Balibar's (2002) and Rumford's (2013) concepts of "bordering" and the moral economies of conflict and destruction are particularly helpful here as they identify the links between state-building practice, the role of security and bordering as a human social practice which impacts on institutional life in the state, and particularly work, civic practice and social mobility. Their work also points to the role that state-building practice plays (including extra-territorial alliances) in expressing political authority in state institutions and in shaping the state's mission or political agenda. Here such issues as region, cultural identity, territory, and the re-scaling of space and security may come together to influence the relationship between state governance practices and actions taken by members of state institutions, constituting a form of border practice designed to ensure the maintenance of political power. Theorising this link allows us to better understand how

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HE actors might practise inclusion and/or exclusion through institutional governance, shape institutional hierarchies and reform agendas and assert or resist cultural and moral logics and norms.

In relation to the role of institutions in creating borders between groups through political governance, security forces or notions of citizenship, Rumford (2013) and Balibar (2002, 2015) are particularly helpful in identifying key links between the state and HE in periods of conflict. They tell us that “borders” are not only tangible and perpetually renegotiated during conflict, regime challenges and transitions. They are also intangible and reimagined and embodied through the lives of peoples, spaces and institutions. In this way, state institutions play a role in shaping the conditions of working life as well as political and moral values and ideological orientations. This is particularly so where state borders and desired or contested territories and notions of citizenship are conceived in highly bureaucratic forms, excessively narrow terms or in highly securitised or patrimonial militarised terms. As a consequence, these spaces and institutions might also represent “theatres of conflict” in circumstances where authoritarian forms of security loom large (Balibar, 2015). Borders are also pivotal in defining the configuration of political and social movements and associated reactions, including those formed around resistance, to the formations of the nation-state.

So, following Balibar (2002, 2015), institutions, political actors and HE actors might be seen as taking expressions that are founded on “seeing like a border”. This implies a distinction between “seeing like a state” and “seeing like a border” in that, by way of the latter, we can recognise the constitutive nature of borders in social, cultural and political terms. This means that HE actors may, for example, engage in local bordering activity to increase their status, improve advantages or regulate the mobility of their collective communities. This certainly does not mean that the authoritarian state is rendered irrelevant. Rather, it implies that we must take into account that “those at, on, or shaping the border and this constituency is increasingly diverse” (Parker and Vaughn-Williams, 2014, p. 171) and in consequence of such accounting, the political outcomes of state control become increasingly unpredictable. In this way we might see HE in terms of the policy expressions of nationalist and authoritarian sentiments and routinised forms of bureaucracy which reside below the surface of public HE missions. These subterranean expressions of the state may also be influenced by extra-territorial forces and the desire for advantage (e.g. elite alliances) but also by forms of resistance (see Shami *et al.*, 2016; de Wit and Altbach, 2017).

Our second theoretical conception rests upon the links between the fragile or weak state, political conflict, destructive economies of power (see Balibar, 2015) and governing actions in HE. This interconnection of concepts places political cultural economies of HE at the forefront of explanations about its status and conditions (Buckner, 2013). However, a key addition we have added to this complex interplay of concepts comprises the political forces and re-scaling of power arrangements that emerge during conflict and go on to manifest themselves inside institutions. These cultural forces and power arrangements might, for example, include violence, intense surveillance and militarisation, intimidation, corruption and the enforcement of wider political norms associated with extra-territorial alliances and state-building practices during war.

We add this latter dimension of political conflict and politicisation to our theorising because most theorising about the role of cultural political economies in HE rarely turns towards an exploration of the character, nature and form of the political dimensions of HE discourse and practice as they relate to state authority, security, conceptions of citizenship and HE practices. Balibar (2002, 2015) astutely named the role of state conflict – including the extra-territorial economic pressures of HE privatisation – as economies of destruction, and here we wish to expand this term to comprehend political cultural economies of HE destruction. Within this framework, politics, religious, cultural and moral conflicts, state

and regional economies and human action are deemed highly fragile and susceptible to wider political fault lines and human antagonisms at heightened and sometimes extreme levels. Together they also have the capacity to mobilise social and economic instruments that – lacking the capacity to negotiate transparently and justly – are subject to extreme power arrangements and heightened conflict; this is what Wattenpaugh *et al.* (2013) describe as HE politicisation. If we are to consider a political framework for conceptualising HE, we need to therefore examine the interdependence of governance, transnational and regional cultural political economies and national politics in a foundational manner (Robertson and Dale, 2015). Assessing the foundations of this interdependence demands an exploration of both the ideological character and the constitution of the polity as two inter-related elements; not only those political agendas and HE policies that are constituted by state authorities but also the very activity of constituting varied forms of security and expressing centralised authority through political bodies and actors. Such an approach necessarily emphasises the need to assess the variations of meaning attached to the ideals of political authority as they are expressed by actors in particular societies and places – in this instance, HE in contemporary Syria.

### Methodology

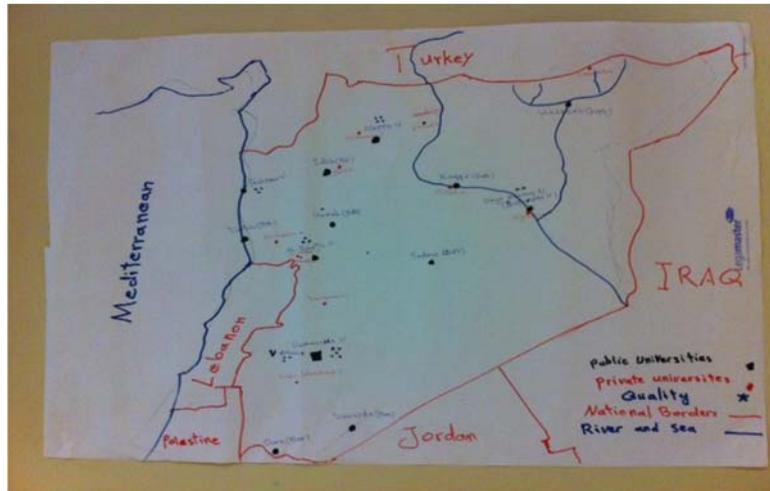
In this section, we report on the methods we used in the overarching project which was commissioned by the Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara) together with some of the challenges that emerged from our design and approaches. One mandate of our work was to engage in capacity-building exercises with Syrian academics and students living in exile in Turkey. The aim was to support Syrian academics and students in exploring techniques for conducting qualitative research, with the goal of enhancing their social and employment mobility whilst displaced or during resettlement. A secondary objective was to undertake an assessment of the status and conditions of HE across Syria, pre- and post-2011, from the perspective of both Syrian academics and students living in exile, and from those who were still residing in Syria. We also developed visual methods which not only offered a window of understanding into the experiences of displacement as they relate to HE and conflict, but which also provided Syrian colleagues with research tools to explore similar issues alongside other Syrian academics and students still residing within the country during the conflict.

The overall design involved a series of inter-related tasks. First, we sought to use the capacity-building dimension of our workshops as a primary source of data collection. This involved creating methods within the context of the workshops that would allow us to collect data on the temporal changes in HE both before and after the onset of the conflict from the perspective of Syrian academics and students. This aim necessitated gaining access to a temporal and visual landscape (see Plates 1(a) and (b) and 2(a) and (b)) for exploring Syrian HE both before and, ultimately, after the onset of the conflict. We therefore sought to develop complementary visual methods to serve as elicitation devices in exploring, for example, the journeys of Syrian academics into exile and/or displacement, HE in conflict, questions about HE and human security and wider issues of professional identity and loss.

Alongside issues of HE and displacement, we had developed a parallel series of preliminary HE themes to explore based on the existing HE literature and included; for example, regional and temporal variations in the status and conditions of HE; quality assurance; student satisfaction, equity, quality and breadth of the curriculum; mechanisms of faculty promotion; workload; student access; and progression and employment pathways for students. Hence, our questions – consonant with these methods – moved across a timescape (see Neale and Hanna, 2012) continuum which bridged pre-conflict HE in Syria and the start of the conflict in 2011. This approach also afforded the possibility of corroborating or challenging any literature-based evidence (and participant-based evidence) about how HE was understood in Syria in the time periods under consideration. Visual methods (event timelines



(a)



(b)

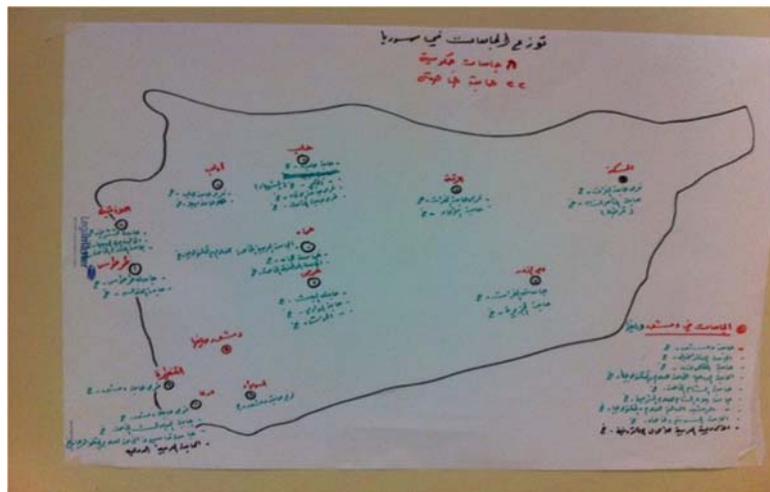


Plate 2.  
Mapping exercise  
completed by the  
workshop participants

### *The role of the interview*

Alongside the 117 interviews collected by the Syrian co-researchers, the Cambridge team conducted open-ended interviews with 19 Syrian academics and students living in exile in Turkey[4]. This involved interviewing Syrian scholars about their experiences of HE, their journeys into displacement, HE policy changes over time and the different character of HE pre- and post-conflict. Interview themes centred upon the following: professional and institutional HE histories; Syrian HE before and after the onset of the conflict; personal and professional experiences of displacement and its consequences; a mapping of the contours of HE (pre- and post-2011) through assessments of historical, political, cultural developments in public and private universities; and consequences for research and teaching (pre- and post-2011).

Security and ethical issues in the interview process were paramount given the highly political nature of the topics that were covered and the conflicted contexts to which they referred. An issue of the highest significance was the maintenance of security within the research context. Participants' concerns about human security were paramount because of longstanding experiences of living and working in a highly securitised state. It is unsurprising that issues of social trust have been reported in the literature as one of the most significant drawbacks in conducting research in "conflict environments" (see Cohen and Arieli, 2011)[5]. For example, Cohen and Arieli (2011) and Jebril (2017) highlight the forms of bordering that may emerge between researchers and research participants who have been working and/or studying in conflict environments or autocratic regimes, under the constant watch of intense security apparatuses. Such bordering can emerge when the research is seen as an "investigation" that may resonate with those kinds of monitoring that participants may have experienced in their own national institutions, most particularly during periods of conflict. Social trust may also be diminished in research when participants have been operating within political contexts where expressions of direct criticism against formal structures of the state might cost jobs or even lives. It may also be that researchers may potentially be seen as committing acts of betrayal against the interests of participants if research reports are seen to operate on behalf of organisations rather than on behalf of research participants. With the aid of the charitable organisation supporting this work and through the sustained efforts of our research team, we therefore sought extensive feedback and consultation on our findings, along with the closest collaborative support with co-researchers and participants where possible. The interview team recognised throughout that participants' experiences of conflict and forced displacement generate levels of social fear and unceasing awareness of personal and professional loss which fundamentally alter the nature and character of the interview context.

All of these issues were at the forefront of our concerns in this project. Our anxieties and concerns surrounding the nature of our roles as researchers were regularly explored and addressed in workshops. In working alongside participants we sought explicitly to assure confidentiality and to acknowledge fears, both expressed and unexpressed. Throughout, participants were able to member check our findings and analysis and to revise or eliminate data where causes for concern were raised. Collaboration in the research process and writing were a fundamental feature of our approach.

University type	Staff male	Staff female	Staff total	Students male	Students female	Students total
Public	31	4	35	48	22	70
Private	5	1	6	3	3	6
Total	36	5	41	51	25	76

**Table I.** Number of staff and students interviewed remotely in Syria by university type (public/private) and gender

Area university is located	Staff male	Staff female	Staff total	Students male	Students female	Students total
Regime controlled	24	3	27	36	20	56
Non-regime controlled	12	2	14	15	5	20
Total	36	5	41	51	25	76

**Table II.** Number of staff and students interviewed in remotely Syria by area (regime controlled/non-regime controlled) and gender

## Emerging themes

### *The heightened politicisation of HE: conflict, governance and bordering*

Under the broad heading of politicisation stands a group of distinctive but related factors. Here we are not pointing to politicisation as a concept which refers to the interaction of diverse political views and forces; such diversity has been effectively absent from Syrian political life since the 1960s. Rather we follow Wattenpaugh *et al.*'s (2014) perspective that politicisation in HE settings refers to a dual system of political change and HE cultures in times of conflict. The first relates to highly intensified forms of security and the re-scaling of militarisation inside HE and the second refers to an increasing conflation of state politics with university governance – that is, drawing “lines in the sand” through the erection of border crossings either enabling or disabling mobility to attend HE, for example, with controls on HE territory through sectarian conflict or heightened security further enhancing climates of fear on campus. This kind of politicisation of HE takes on different features of the prevailing political landscape. As a consequence we distinguish these forms of politicisation from other reports (see Wattenpaugh *et al.*, 2014) on Syrian students and academics who are displaced, where the main aim has been to examine the very significant challenges such HE actors face as a direct result of the humanitarian crisis and displacement, albeit a highly significant topic which we touch on in this paper.

We have examined the politicisation of HE through two main trends in both the literature and our current research:

- (1) mission, governance and decision making, particularly as these relate to security and to the transformation of HE; and
- (2) challenges to the safety and human rights of HE staff and students through political economies of destruction and insecurity, as well as through the development of new and imagined HE landscapes resulting from the conflict from 2011 onwards.

### *Mission, governance and decision making*

There has been a decline in the level of education in Syrian universities, especially in locations of fierce battles such as Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, Deir el-Zour and Raqqa, as many university professors have left the country. In some of these universities, available lecturers are now limited to graduate students (Al Monitor, 2014).

Beyond the ubiquitous effects of the conflict itself, HE has been substantially affected by the political and bordered divisions between regime and non-regime areas on issues of governance, decision making and mission statements. Whilst much of the post-2011 literature addresses the external displacement and migration of Syrians in need of education and support (see Dillabough *et al.*, 2018b), to date there are very few reports focusing on the internal status and conditions of HE post-2011 (see Wattenpaugh *et al.*, 2013). A particular pressing absence is a first-person Syrian perspective that can be supported by reliable evidence. In this section, we ask what elements, if any, of HE provision continued to function in any conventional fashion and, where possible, we seek to identify patterns of differentiation in HE nationally since 2011[6].

In light of the intensified conflict and the entrenchment of new territorial divisions across Syrian HE today, the concept of an effectively nationalised public and quasi-private system of HE was losing its significance at the time of the study. This is largely because the conflict has led to struggles for institutional dominance and survival, and the associated emergence of new institutions in both non-regime-controlled and regime-controlled areas. A further problem for institutional survival is the vast number of internally and externally displaced university staff and students resulting from HE closures linked to war and new border controls, fragmentation and disintegration

(Butter, 2016; Hinnebusch, 2012). Hinnebusch and Zintl (2015), Milton (2018) and Milton and Barakat (2016) demonstrate that fragmentation and decimation are constricting both social trust and faith in the legitimate credentials associated with HE. Successive NGO reports also argue that HE has become a largely neglected sector since the onset of the war in Syria (Culbertson and Louay, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2016, 2017). HE has also become a site of what Wattenpaugh *et al.* (2014) identify as the paramilitarisation of university campuses. Wattenpaugh *et al.* (2014) write:

Last Spring we received reports from Syrian students in Lebanon about the paramilitarisation of the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS), a Ba'ath-party affiliated and pro-regime student organisation. The students indicated that the NUSS, at times wearing insignia, were patrolling Syrian university campuses, guarding the university gates, and monitoring fellow students for political activism or disloyalty. Syrian students and faculty in Turkey also reported this development, describing it as a broader infiltration of Syrian university campuses by the security apparatus (p. 12).

This intense politicisation of HE through militarised governance has been marked by a heightened intensification of the regime's desire to retain power over all institutional sectors and regions of Syria, and consequently increased levels of security control supplemented by systematic intimidation (Tinti, 2017); the reversal of any potential pre-2011 attempts to achieve a more "modernised" autonomous form of governance in HE (see Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015); and the assertion of new political ideals through HE institutions in non-regime-controlled areas, which will be addressed later in the paper.

Particularly important for understanding HE governance during the conflict has been the literature on leadership in HE, the security apparatus and war economies (see Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015; Sinjab, 2017; Turkmani *et al.*, 2015). In a similar way that conceptual literature within the domain of political economy points to the role of political and economic power in creating particular kinds of bordered institutions, the HE literature suggests that university appointments in regime-controlled HE sites since 2011 have been linked very closely with the regime in ways not seen before 2011, with some former security officials taking on leadership roles. As one participant reported:

The political decision-maker is no longer interested in the universities or their tools, and decision-making has clearly moved into the hands of security. The university has lost many of its values; there is no respect for freedoms and no separation between academic work and conditions in the country. The university has become like any other institution where there is no sanctity to the place or safeguarding for the student and teacher (uni\_4\_staff\_7\_M).

In regime-controlled areas, there are also signs that governance and decision making form a unified process which involves, first, a substantially heightened autocratic approach to HE governance, alongside a purging of those leaders and scholars who have shown signs of dissent, followed by mass HE appointments of regime supporters to leadership positions (Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015). Another respondent reported the following:

In 2012, I was informed by the Air Force Intelligence in Syria that I should report to an intelligence branch because of an account that states that I was speaking up about injustices committed against activists and students. I took one night to think about this and decided to leave the city immediately. The security situation was very dangerous and the circle of protests was spreading like an oil stain. We received news about the detention of a number of academics from our university [...] two academics were assassinated. The Mukhabarat[7] assassinated them and then blamed the other side claiming that unknown fictitious groups were responsible for these assassinations (Interviewee 2).

As this interviewee points out, increasingly heightened security became an organising feature of Syrian scholars' professional identity as it worked to imply a need for bordered and allied forms of complicity, fear, detention or displacement. Similar outcomes have

been reported by Wattenpaugh *et al.* (2013) in Jordan where they interviewed Syrian students and academics in exile, living in camps along the Jordanian border. Governance within this HE context emerged as a form of militarisation, premised on fear and insecurity.

The increasing role of politics – where a heightened, although far from novel, conflation of state politics and HE emerges – was reinforced by another respondent: “After 2011, decisions were increasingly affected by the interference of the Baa’th Regional Command, National Security Bureau and the security organs” (uni 4\_staff 7\_M). Wattenpaugh *et al.* (2014) and Yavkan and El-Ghali (2017) further corroborate the argument that such forms of securitised and infiltrated governance have culminated in disrespect for, and distrust of, Syrian HE.

The governance of HE could also be seen by some as resembling a particularly bordered world view as reflected through university decision making. One respondent (uni 7\_staff 4\_M) reported, for example, that despite earlier decrees supporting greater university autonomy, decision making was both centralised and politicised: “decisions concerning the university [should be] the university’s responsibility but the party always intervenes”. And another reported: “I have seen no change except more security interventions into the university administration” (uni 10\_staff 3\_M).

The practice of bordering and patrimonial state alliance-building through private patronage was described by virtually all participants in the enquiry. HE governance was reported, for example, as mediated by patronage arrangements between business elites and the regime’s support for allied entrepreneurs in the private university sector (Milton, 2018; Sottimano, 2016). Mazawi (2011) also suggested indirectly that the demands of the war economy on HE and associated conflicts created a novel set of opportunities for exploiting HE as a kind of intermediary frontier zone for financial benefit and undermining good HE governance. The consequence is that in terms of funding, HE has been left behind (Milton, 2018; *Times Higher Education*, 2013; Kabbani and Salloum, 2011).

#### *Non-regime HE developments*

The conditions and status of HE in the non-regime areas are less clear because they were more recently established or have been diminished, and intense levels of conflict and violence remain. Consequently, there is a scarcity of robust literature documenting HE governance and decision making in these localities (Azzi, 2017). Online news reports suggest that in some areas there are simply no operational universities due to a lack of financial support, ongoing conflict and bombings, lack of accreditation, safety concerns and the associated challenges of delivering aid support to the HE sector (see Syria Direct, Al-Haj Ali, 2016). Here we witness Balibar’s (2002) political economies of destruction in action within HE. One participant shared the following on HE in the non-regime-controlled areas:

[...] after 2011, universities were few in number in the liberated regions and appointments were made based on the availability of qualified and competent persons. It is worth mentioning that the number of academics still in Syria is very small because of forced migration linked to the political and economic instability of Syria (uni 5\_staff 8\_M).

During the focus group discussions the following concern was articulated:

The only problem in the liberated areas is the fact that success depends on personal efforts where academics try to carry on education in the buildings formerly used by the university, at the time of the Regime, to allow students to continue their education. Yet some of these efforts have lacked the support of any formal body or organisation (Focus group discussion with academics).

The idea of reimagined borders as a challenge to Syrian state-building and as a way of liberating HE from regime politics also emerged. For example, a staff member in a

non-regime area described one of these institutions to us: “the university [...] seeks to ensure education for students in the liberated regions who cannot travel to the universities of the regime. [...] Teachers, against the regime, are reconnected with the university. The University Council and the Higher Education Council pass all the decisions related to university management”. But these efforts were reported as having their own challenges: “a lack of recognition may lead to frustration and loss of hope. We may not be able to conduct research because publishers do not acknowledge our university” (uni 5\_staff 1\_M). HE legitimacy in such spaces was unclear but the impact of a fragile and conflicted state with weak institutionalism was acknowledged.

Another account from our enquiry documents this institution’s social mission of developing qualified persons and “scientific services to society”. The university is said to be “managed by efficient employees according to a strong autonomous but internally controlled [recruitment] system” whereby “appointments are based on experience and competency”. Governance in this university has changed since 2011 “because the revolutionary principle was followed and relations with the regime were severed. But the curriculum adopted by the universities of the regime remained the same in the liberated regions”. While insider accounts are far from serving as evidence of quality assurance itself, they are useful indications of staff perceptions and morale as the following excerpt from the same account illustrates:

Our work is based on academic principles and mutual respect between the administration and the teaching staff are adopting a similar approach to the highest ranking universities of the world. [...] The quality assurance of my work improved as a consequence of high levels of mutual respect. Before 2011 treatment depended on favouritism and party committees but now it is based on experience and competency (uni 5\_staff 3\_M).

Here we witness a potential loosening of national boundedness and new forms of spatial socialisation associated with a “liberated HE” even whilst the state strove to remain a crucial arbiter of these territorial spaces. As a consequence, challenges in these highly insecure HE sites do remain and the complexity of conducting HE in a conflict zone was acknowledged: “There is the fragility of society and the absence of leadership to work in the liberated regions” (uni 5\_staff 3\_M). Other participants stated that there are “qualified persons and specialists in all aspects of society” and “an open and continuously renewed system that constantly aims for development” (uni 5\_staff 4\_M). Another account suggested that the “liberated university curriculum is educational, informative and enlightening” and appointments are “based on their qualifications” and “no longer dependent on party membership” (uni 5\_staff 6\_M). Whilst challenges were apparent, these had not undermined hope for new HE missions in non-regime areas: “although this is a difficult and a fateful phase, there are academics who are [...] using their experience and skills to realise progress in HE and to develop a scientific foundation of knowledge [...] to match rapid developing technological and scientific progress” (uni 5\_staff 8\_M).

#### *Challenges to physical safety: purges, patronage, detention, disappearances and violence*

In general, Syrian universities are used to produce quiescence and political support and serve in many ways to foster indoctrination; academic freedom in the Syrian academy is non-existent (Wattenpaugh *et al.*, 2013).

In this section, we discuss the part played by the security apparatus in purging, detaining and/or kidnapping students and faculty members against a general background of exceedingly high levels of violence. This is attested in a number of sources, both published and online. In a report for the Brookings Institution on the Arab World, Barakat and Milton (2015) argue that higher education is often an unrecognised casualty of war (p. 1). A *Times Higher Education* report written by the British Council’s Sally Ward (2014, see also Law, 2016)

described the challenges faced by students and university staff in confronting the overwhelming dangers they faced pursuing their university education alongside constant fears of infiltration by the security apparatus within university spaces (see also Butter, 2016; UNHCR, 2017). Students and academics are presented in this literature as potential targets for state violence, regime thugs and violent extremists, seeking to influence the political practices of a wider population of students and civic actors (Deverjan, 2016). Some of these students and faculty have reportedly been forced into military action since 2011 – a clear border politics of heightened politicisation of HE actors – whilst others have fled to avoid military service (Deverjan, 2016). Clearly, mandatory conscription does not only apply to HE actors as part of a state-wide policy but is also applied only to males who are not eligible for deferral of military service based on their student status enrolment. However, in the last few years of the conflict deferral conditions have tightened or have been ignored and many students reported being aware that if they remained in Syria and were conscripted they risked death because of the enormity of the conflict. Clarke-Saddler (2017) reported, for example, that in 2013 life for students and faculty inside Syrian HE was becoming increasingly untenable and that many individuals were being purged from the system. It was widely reported that in January 2013 that a bomb struck Aleppo killing many people, and that many students and staff were forced to flee to Jordan (see also Luo and Craddock, 2016; Marcus, 2016). In 2014 Turkmani reported in *Times Higher Education* that the “Syrian higher education system is in meltdown [...] students and academics have fled the country, are targets for militants, kidnapping is on the rise because they have relatively high salaries and influence, a number of the universities have been forced to close, whilst those that remain are barely functional”. Similar observations were supported by our interviewees:

A Syrian aircraft bombed the Faculty of Architecture and students were killed. We are only scholars [and not politicians] in the Faculty of Humanities and we made a statement against aerial attacks and bombing churches and historical places in Aleppo. We were called to Security Centres and the offices of the Baath party. We were interrogated and pushed to make a counter statement declaring that we were misled, which was irrational (Interviewee 19).

The reported use of universities as sites of intense policing and warfare also emerged: “the military police came and took them [academics and students] from the university. What is more important is that universities were transformed into military barracks”. Once more, symbolic references to HE as a site of conflict and bordering emerged. We went on to ask our respondent: “So you had army personnel at the university?” They replied: “there were members from Security Forces that attended the university and observed students and teachers. And the administration of the university came into contact with them to coordinate and provide them with reports or names of personnel or students who opposed the regime” (Interviewee 19). The scale of security infiltration was corroborated by another interviewee: “you will be controlled in everything you do in your life by the secret services and the regime” [...] (Interviewee 7).

The literature on the nature of the security apparatus in HE indicated that academics in Syria were targeted from the beginning of the uprising because some were seen as vocal opponents of repression (Goodman, 2016; Wattenpaugh *et al.*, 2014). We were informed through focus groups that faculty and students at the University of Aleppo were cut off from other cities, arrested at checkpoints and experienced high levels of intimidation, detention and harassment. Students were also forced to negotiate highly dangerous checkpoints. These checkpoints represented clear geo-political lines that were divided up and formed associated geographies of power in the name of the conflict. Some of these checkpoints were manned by regime troops or IS militants (Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015; Goodman, 2016).

We also learned from focus group participants that academics within particular Syrian territories controlled by Daesh were only allowed to work at universities if they conformed to Sharia law (IIE Scholar Rescue Fund, 2016, 2018; Sheikh, 2016). Scholars reported

experiencing extensive and violent intimidation to ensure these requirements were met. Daesh members were authorised to approve courses and “militants replaced science and math courses – which they considered against the teachings of Islam or simply not useful – with courses on Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and on the Quran” (Sheikh, 2016). Again we see another kind of bordering reflecting ethno-religious conflict and a political force that did not exist in Syria before the rise of Islamic factions and Daesh in 2014.

In the course of a conflict, such bordering and intensely heightened security practices – as extreme expressions of authoritarian “statecraft” – are designed to inculcate both fear and complicity amongst students and faculty, with any perceived dissent heavily monitored and often violently punished or coerced. Yahia and Turkmani (2011) in particular have pointed to the pervasive fear that such targeting engenders and its “economies of destruction” (see Balibar, 2002) which impact on research cultures that were already stagnating because of a dearth of both intellectual capacity and research funding:

The reality of education is that it is very poor because of the terrible destruction that affected the universities, the difficulties of travel, the division of the country and the lack of research funding. We hope to support higher education in order to rebuild Syrian society. [...] Most of the academics have been pursued by the Syrian regime because of their position in the Syrian revolution (uni 6\_staff 1\_M).

Wattenpaugh *et al.* (2013) indicated that many students and academics were highly politicised as a result of the combination of grievances that they had suffered: “university students and recent graduates, especially those with advanced social media skills, were often at the forefront of organising demonstrations on and off campuses [...] Student leaders and their families were harassed by secret police; others were jailed and some killed while in custody [...] and as the war itself expanded, especially to the cities of Aleppo and Homs, Syrian students faced increasing security concerns on campus” (p. 10). The report highlighted the fragmentation the war had caused across the HE sector and the forms of associated corruption that have ensued. It also indicated how internal displacements and security fears restricted access to HE through new border checks and crossing, primarily through checkpoint policing practices (see UNHCR, 2017): “At these checkpoints, civilians and their vehicles are searched and their papers examined, and students and faculty can be detained or arrested at the soldiers’ discretion or secret police” (p. 10). The report also drew attention to the plight of female students and the particular concerns for their safety when being scrutinised by soldiers manning the checkpoints (Wattenpaugh *et al.*, 2013, p. 10).

The politics of intimidation have generated both visible and less obvious impacts that are felt at the levels of education and human well-being, both of which are severely undermined. Numerous references were made to “absolute security control” (uni 1\_staff 1\_M), corruption and “random arrests” (uni 10\_staff 4\_M). This is how Interviewee 16 recalls the traumatic event experienced by his colleagues:

In 2012 I heard from my colleagues in our laboratory that there were soldiers who came to our university, struck the doors and destroyed everything and hit everybody there because they protested against the regime (Interviewee 16).

Another report of violence directed towards an academic staff member was recalled by Interviewee 6:

One of the professors was dragged by two security officials in front of the students. That professor was taken to prison and they charged him because of his political views.

The general atmosphere within universities was of pervasive fear, in which “anyone working at the university could be stopped from communicating with anyone outside” (Interviewee 3). This heightened insecurity has undermined staff morale and motivation to carry on, and shaped the moral and political landscape of HE as one that is shrouded in

economies of destruction, corruption and instability: “the absence of principles has negatively affected my performance and I have lost initiative and stability” (uni 2\_staff 4\_M). Widespread corruption has also ensued: “all means of fraud are exercised openly and exposed due to the absence of control” (uni 10\_staff 4\_M). This fear was also evidenced in our interviews with Syrian academics in exile:

My house was in an area of a countryside, which was taken by the Free Syrian Army. I lived under the shelling for a while and even once a shell came down near me and my survival was a miracle. So, I left my house and lived in the areas which were under the control of the regime (Interviewee 5).

Another participant recalled that everyone had become a subject of interrogation and detention: “Once, I was with my family in my car, in my home town, and I was shot at. But God saved us. Another time, I was stopped at a checkpoint for interrogation, I was almost detained” (Interviewee 15). And still another shared a life-threatening experience of terror in his own house: “A group of masked members came to my house. They took me and also took my car. It was a terrifying situation. They beat me and took a rifle and shot above my head to scare me” (Interviewee 19).

Having been prevented from leaving Syria early due to “personal circumstances”, one participant experienced a series of traumatic events including the loss of many colleagues, the shelling of his university, difficulties commuting to work or renting in safer areas and threats of interrogation and detention:

Lots of my colleagues have died and this has had a damaging impact on me. Many used to live in a countryside where the crisis started, so they couldn't commute to their work as transportation was very difficult. Also, the security situation was very difficult and they used to witness numerous security investigations; the Intelligence Service used to detain people often in those affected areas. So, lots of them had to move to more secure or safer areas. This was not easy as the rent of the houses started to rise to a degree that the lecturer in the university might pay all his salary or even more as a rent. The situation of those people was very bad and some of them had to move between different areas because of the security situation. We all were badly affected. [...] On many occasions, the shelling got inside the university and lots of students were killed. Of course, the source of that shelling was unknown. In addition, lots of students suffered from detaining (Interviewee 9).

Under circumstances of heightened politicisation, purges and violence, research participants wanted a different vision of the university into the future. One respondent commented that: “we want to separate politics from our universities. We don't want war any more. We need to educate people to be able to live well and have meaningful lives” (Interviewee 17), “we need to bring war to an end and remove the political party from the university” (uni 4\_staff 1\_M) and “we need complete removal of security branches from the university” (uni 10\_staff 3\_M). At the same time there was deep regret that no such initiatives existed (uni 4\_staff 1\_M and uni 4\_staff 2\_M).

## Conclusions

In this paper, we have identified the following sub-trends which call for further attention, not least because a clearer appreciation of them will shape the fundamental integrity of Syrian HE in the future.

These trends are:

- Concern over the heightened politicisation of HE through a variety of war-related and bordering mechanisms, many of which involve violence. Examples are corrupt governance structures, the practices of militarisation on university campuses, new border controls and a highly intensified re-scaled security apparatus leading to, in many cases, the decimation of HE, its fragmentation or dysfunctionality.

- Increasing detentions, patronage, unprecedented human displacement and murder of students and faculty are all evident. Taken together, these factors are converging to create climates of intense fear and corrosive distrust in HE.
- Internal and external displacement are also transforming the demographic make-up of HE and undermining its capacity to fulfil national obligations to the state and labour market and its public mission. Forms of social containment have led to personal and professional questions about how to imagine oneself as an academic or a scholar operating in spaces of confinement or exile. This has contributed to substantially diminished social mobility for those who either sought to obtain, or carried, HE credentials from Syria, and to frequent failures to obtain HE or complete degree programmes (Avery and Said, 2014; Heydemann and Leenders, 2014).
- Substantial features of the post-2011 landscape include vast and rising unemployment, poverty, protracted internal and external displacement and stagnation. There are clear signs that this will only worsen as the conflict persists, as international UN agencies and support from other nations retreat whilst key sector alliances and support structures are further diminished.

The interviews we conducted also attest to the scale and degree of the destruction of higher education in Syria. Many of our academic participants have alluded to the essential support afforded by individual NGOs and individual countries or organisations. However, studies show that the scale of the problem now requires much more than such efforts. Barakat and Milton (2015) and Milton and Barakat (2016) argue that the scale of the problems now in both Syria and the wider region suggests that there is a need for a co-ordinated approach to both rebuild and protect higher education along with those who learn and teach within it. Academics in our study also debated the virtues and disadvantages of universities in exile. There is unquestionably a need for a more co-ordinated approach to the care and development of displaced academics.

The accounts of Syrian academics and students emerging from this work have also pointed to some of the state-building expressions of HE manifested in the shaping of professional and personal experiences. The condition and status of HE and its spatial arrangements and associated power formations have resulted in feelings of intense personal and professional insecurity among Syrian scholars and students from 2011 onwards. Whilst acknowledging that the Syrian situation is deemed one of the worst humanitarian crises in the region in recent decades, these accounts resonate, if in different ways, with other studies of academics and students elsewhere who have experienced highly centralised and autocratic states and tightly regulated HE governance regimes (Barakat and Milton, 2015; Milton and Barakat, 2016). The key difference in Syria at this point in its political history lies in the problematic associated with an intensified militarisation of HE, a greatly heightened security apparatus and associated forms of corruption and violence. Importantly, therefore, our approach signals the varied ways in which the operation of HE in times of conflict can be understood within academic communities, both inside Syria and in relation to wider transnational conflicts and alliances and particular histories of citizenship within securitised states.

The emergence of new borders and the intensified politicisation of HE as a result of the conflict is one way that experience in HE shifts the terms upon which HE actors understand and perceive their professional roles, their conceptions of the role of universities in times of conflict, the negotiation of zones of transition and how to reimagine their futures. If there is one over-riding issue that needs to be addressed it is that intensified politicisation of HE is not only a dangerous avenue for engagement in professional life. It is also a threat to the public order of Syria and creates levels of national and regional destabilisation that impact on other states, particularly those housing large number of Syrian academics and students

in exile and in need of substantial personal and professional support after the experience of conflict. As Millican (2017) tells us: the tripartite operations of universities – teaching, research, and service to the wider community – must be an essential feature of peacebuilding in nation-states, but it can not do justice to such a task in sites of fear, insecurity and militarisation.

First-hand accounts of the state of Syrian HE post-2011 have provided some evidence of the ways in which a fractured state in conflict regulates, rescales and heightens the conditions of an intensely politicised HE and its security architecture. Arguably, in this context HE is exploited in the name of political warfare and the bordered “economies of destruction” (see Balibar, 2015) are only intelligible when assessed in relation to wider geographies of state power, the surplus effects of authoritarianism populism, desires for wider regional power and a moral crisis over legitimate HE identities as they are understood through particular regions of Syria. The words of our participants demonstrate the advance of an autocratic state seeking to control HE through a dehumanising security apparatus within an institutional sector that depends upon political autonomy to thrive but where there remain few current options but to be complicit, resist, remain in the dominant political fold, flee, be tortured or die. These practices cannot be separated from the wider forms of political transformation taking place in Syria, creating new forms of everyday inequalities and erecting new borders, as well as re-enacting older state frameworks and replicating, at least in part, earlier colonial classifications.

Whilst we have not yet exhausted the many themes emerging from this work, we hope this paper provides a context for better understanding the complex matrices of power at work in shaping the conditions and status of HE, its borders and the associated forms of estrangement, displacement, losses and human suffering that have tormented Syria’s scholars and students. We also hope this work offers an analytical framework and a methodology for engaging these social relations as sites for new forms of social investigation of HE in conditions of conflict.

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### Notes

1. Cara is a charity that supports the social mobility of academics and students living in exile or displaced as a result of conflict. Cara negotiated access to research participants and funded this research in part.
2. For a more detailed account of this aspect of the study see Dillabough *et al.* (2018a, b).
3. The interviews collected remotely in Syria are referenced as uni (number)\_staff/student (number) \_gender. No further details are included so that we do not compromise research participants anonymity and confidentially.
4. The interviews with 19 displaced academics are referenced in the paper as Interviewee (number). All 19 interviewees are male.
5. Whilst there is much debate about the insider/outsider relationship in research, in this context it must be seen in a different vein. For example, in a standard qualitative research paradigm, insider/outsider is typically viewed as a difference in life experience or degrees of difference

around ethnicity or class within a similar and familiar space (eg, elite status vs working class). However, the degrees of variation in this context did not simply stem from this notion of insider/outsider within the same geo-political region. Instead, the insider/outsider relationship is constructed as “the West” and the Arab World, and an outsider can be anyone who is capable of reporting to the public on matters that could undermine one’s security in their home country or elsewhere. This creates layers of insecurity around collecting personal data which are not equivalent to the kinds of insider/outsider dilemmas that emerge in more democratic contexts. This is an important thing to consider in framing the ethics of the research at the outset of any such research/capacity-building process with those in forced exile, regardless of their status or background.

6. It is important to note that data pointing to highly functional HE in Syria are often reported by the MOHE or by universities themselves but they are often unreliable sources of data.
7. *Mukhabarat* is the Arabic term for intelligence or intelligence agency. The term is sometimes used negatively, connotating repression often by means of secret police or state terror, in Arab countries.

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